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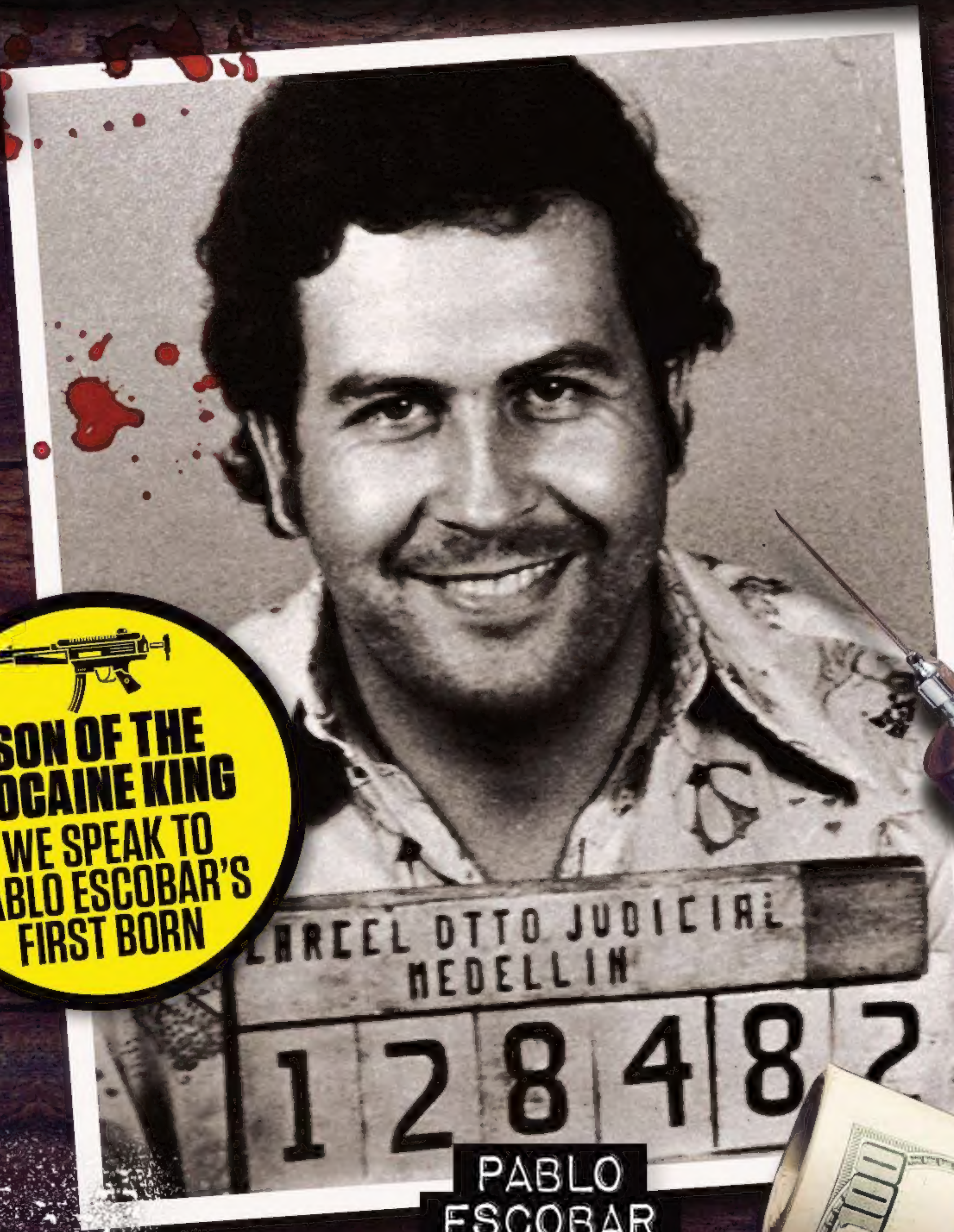
REAL  
**CRIME**


# NARCOS

SHOCKING STORIES OF THE WORLD'S MOST  
NOTORIOUS DRUG LORDS & CARTELS

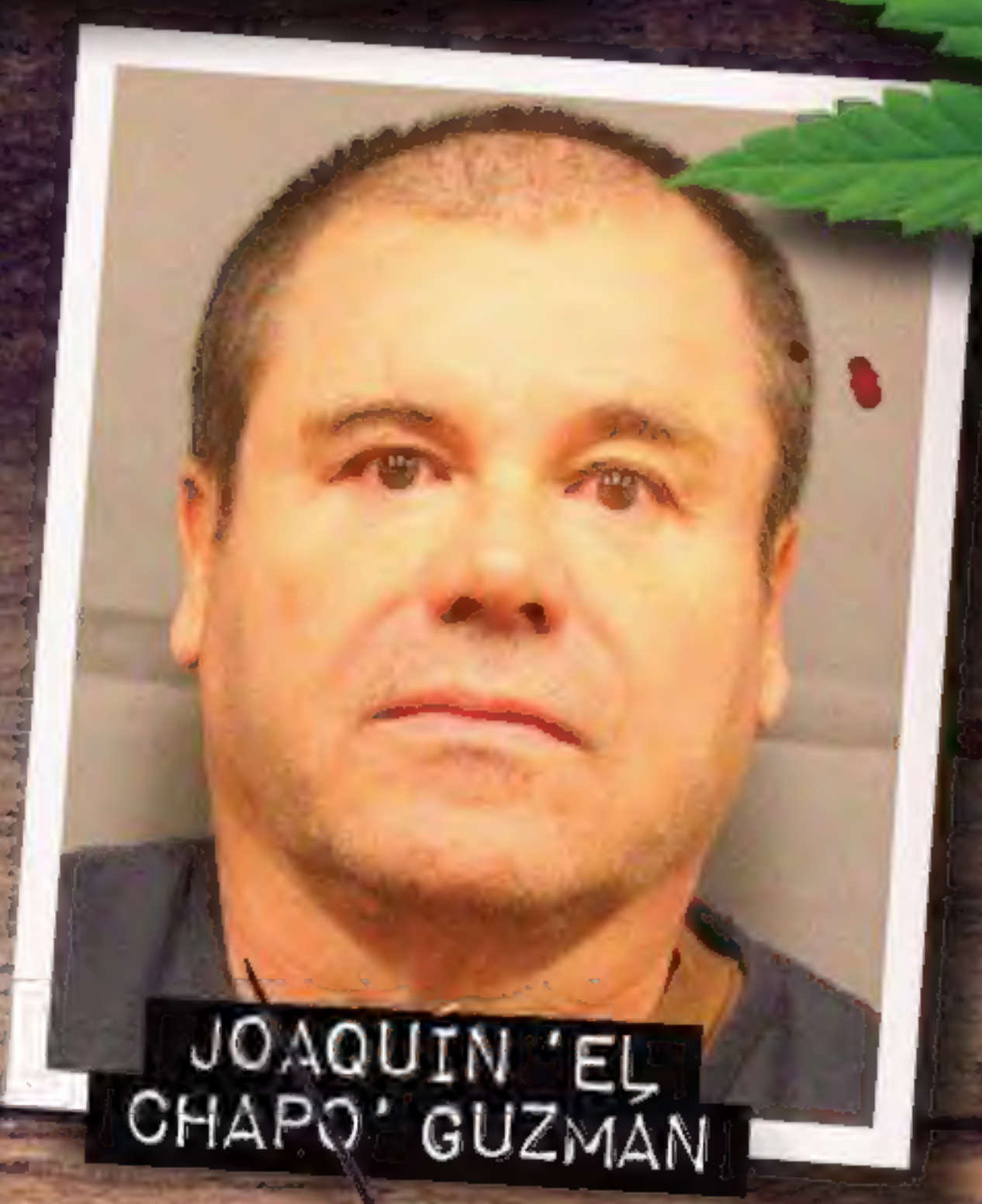


GRISELDA BLANCO,  
'GODMOTHER OF COCAINE'



  
**SON OF THE  
COCAINE KING**  
- WE SPEAK TO  
PABLO ESCOBAR'S  
FIRST BORN

PABLO  
ESCOBAR



JOAQUIN 'EL  
CHAPO' GUZMAN



ISMAEL 'EL  
MAYO' ZAMBADA



Digital  
Edition

FUTURE  
SECOND EDITION



THE GANGS



THE CRIMES



THE RESPONSE







The background of the entire page is a collage of US dollar bills, primarily \$100 bills, which are slightly out of focus. A large, vibrant green marijuana leaf is positioned in the lower-left corner, partially overlapping the bills. The text is centered within a white rectangular box that has a thin black border.

WELCOME TO

# NARCOS

The world of narcotics and drug trafficking is a brutal, bloody and dangerous one, where murder and unimaginable violence are commonplace. But if you're prepared to get your hands dirty – or have people willing to do it for you – it's also a world where you can make *a lot* of money. Pablo Escobar and Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán rose from humble beginnings in Colombia and Mexico respectively to become two of the richest, most powerful and most dangerous men the world has ever seen. While Escobar's Medellín Cartel died along with their boss in 1993, El Chapo's Sinaloa Cartel continues to dominate the narcotics business despite his life sentence in 2019. Inside we delve into the rise and fall of these drug-trafficking powerhouses, meet some of the rival gangs and drug lords from Latin America and beyond, look back at how the illegal drug trade took over the world, and find out how the authorities are fighting back against the cartels with their own ruthless tactics.





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# NARCOS

**Future PLC** Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA

**Real Crime Narcos Editorial**

Editor **Dan Peel**

Compiled by **Drew Sleep & Phil Martin**

Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**

Head of Art & Design **Greg Whitaker**

Editorial Director **Jon White**

**Real Crime Editorial**

Editor **Ben Biggs**

Art Editor **Kym Winters**

**Cover images**

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**Photography**

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Media packs are available on request

Commercial Director **Clare Dove**

**International**

Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**

licensing@futurenet.com

www.futurecontenthub.com

**Circulation**

Head of Newstrade **Tim Mathers**

**Production**

Head of Production **Mark Constance**

Production Project Manager **Matthew Eglinton**

Advertising Production Manager **Joanne Crosby**

Digital Editions Controller **Jason Hudson**

Production Managers **Keely Miller, Nola Cokely,  
Vivienne Calvert, Fran Twentymen**

**Printed by** William Gibbons, 26 Planetary Road,  
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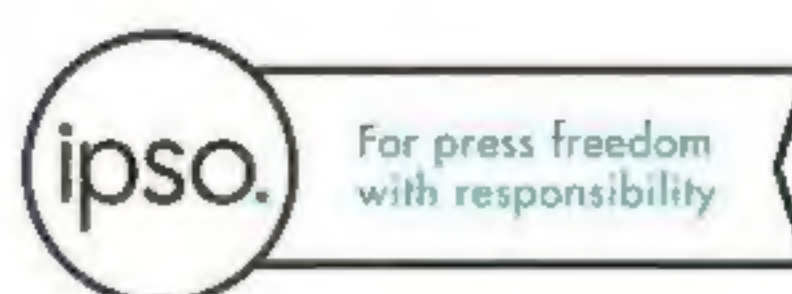
Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**  
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**  
Chief financial officer **Rachel Addison**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

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# CONTENTS

## 8 HISTORY OF THE DRUG TRADE

Explore the underworld evolution of narcotics

## GANGS & DRUG LORDS

### 20 THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COCAINE KING

We set the record straight about Colombia's murderous narco-terrorist, Pablo Escobar, and his Medellín cronies

### 30 "THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT MY FATHER"

We talk to Pablo Escobar's first-born son about murders, millions and kidnapping

### 36 GRISELDA BLANCO: GODMOTHER OF COCAINE

In the 1970s and 1980s, Griselda Blanco was at the forefront of the Medellín Cartel's move into the US's burgeoning cocaine market

### 42 CALI-MONEY, MURDER & MAYHEM

The Cali Cartel was one of the biggest, wealthiest and bloodiest criminal networks in history. No crime was off-limits. No enemy was beyond their reach

### 48 LOS URABEÑOS

As paramilitary and guerrilla organisations demobilise in Colombia, an upstart from the north has become one of the country's most feared gangs

### 54 PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL

They started life as a prison gang but they have grown to become Brazil's most feared criminals

### 62 THE RISE OF EL CHAPO

The world of the Mexican drug cartels is deadly and super competitive. To succeed as a Godfather, you need to see your chance and seize it

### 72 THE SINALOA CARTEL

The story behind the world's most powerful drug trafficking organisation and how it has turned Mexico into a war zone

### 78 THE FLORES BROTHERS VS EL CHAPO

The Flores brothers climbed to the top of a drug empire and lived a glamorous narco lifestyle, but a war between cartels forced them to become part of a case that sent dozens of cartel members to prison

### 84 LOS ZETAS

Brutal bloody chaos like you've never seen before – what happened when Mexico's Elite Commandos switched sides to form their own cartel

### 90 GLOBAL COMPETITION

Latin America is not alone in producing drug cartels – discover some of the biggest from around the world

## WAR ON DRUGS

### 100 14 YEARS OF BLOOD, DRUGS & WAR

Mexico's government declared war on the country's drug cartels in 2006. After thousands of deaths and years of shootouts, arrests and assassinations, it is still far from clear if anything much has been achieved

### 106 KILL TEAM

Brazil's elite SWAT unit is trained and equipped to wage war on the traficantes, but their record is tainted by corruption and brutality

### 112 BORDERLANDS INVESTIGATOR

For 20 years, Melissa Del Bosque has reported on the narco-traffickers along the US-Mexico border, risking her life by venturing into cartel country to expose corruption, devastation and violence

### 120 CONTRAS, CRACK AND THE CIA CONNECTION

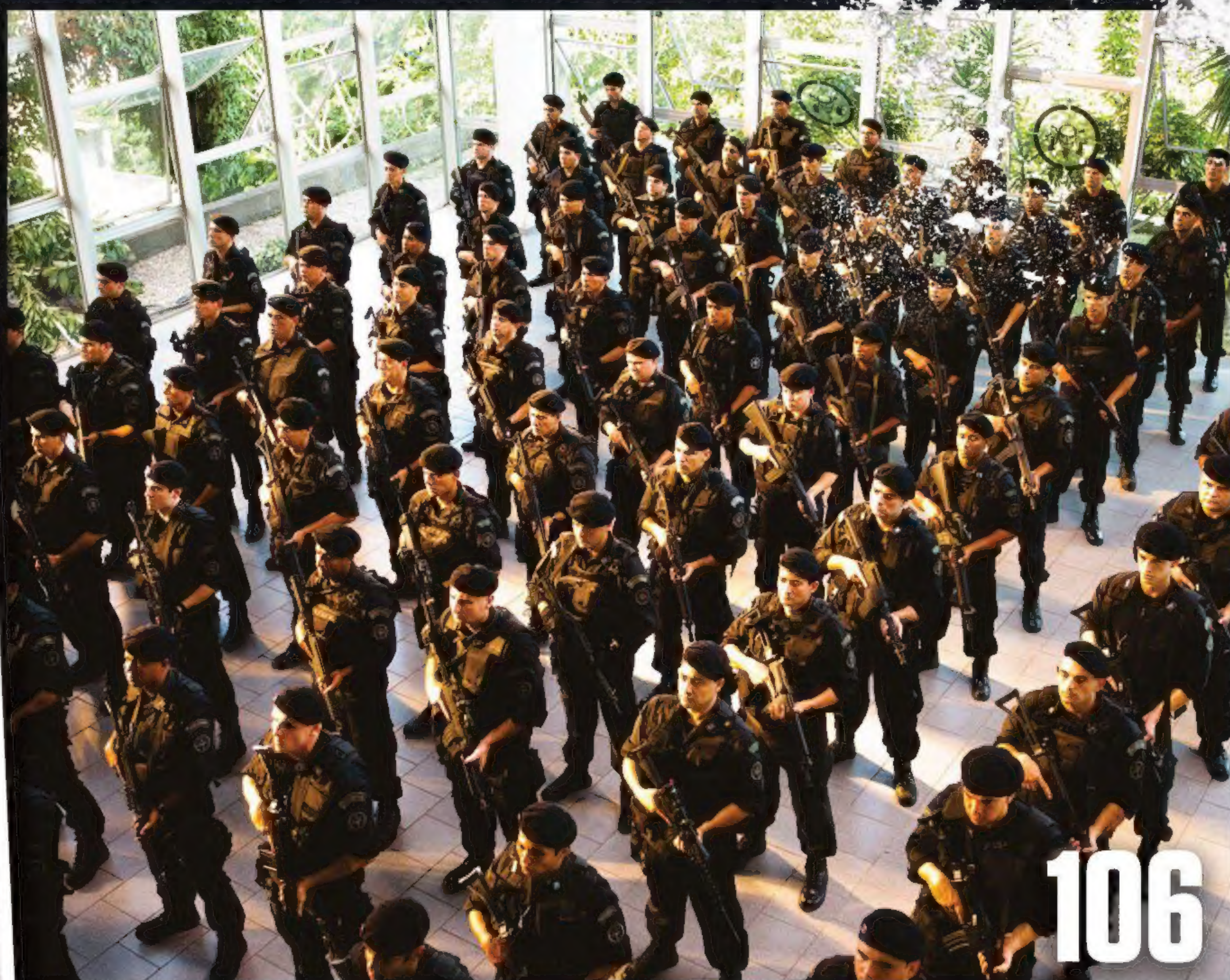
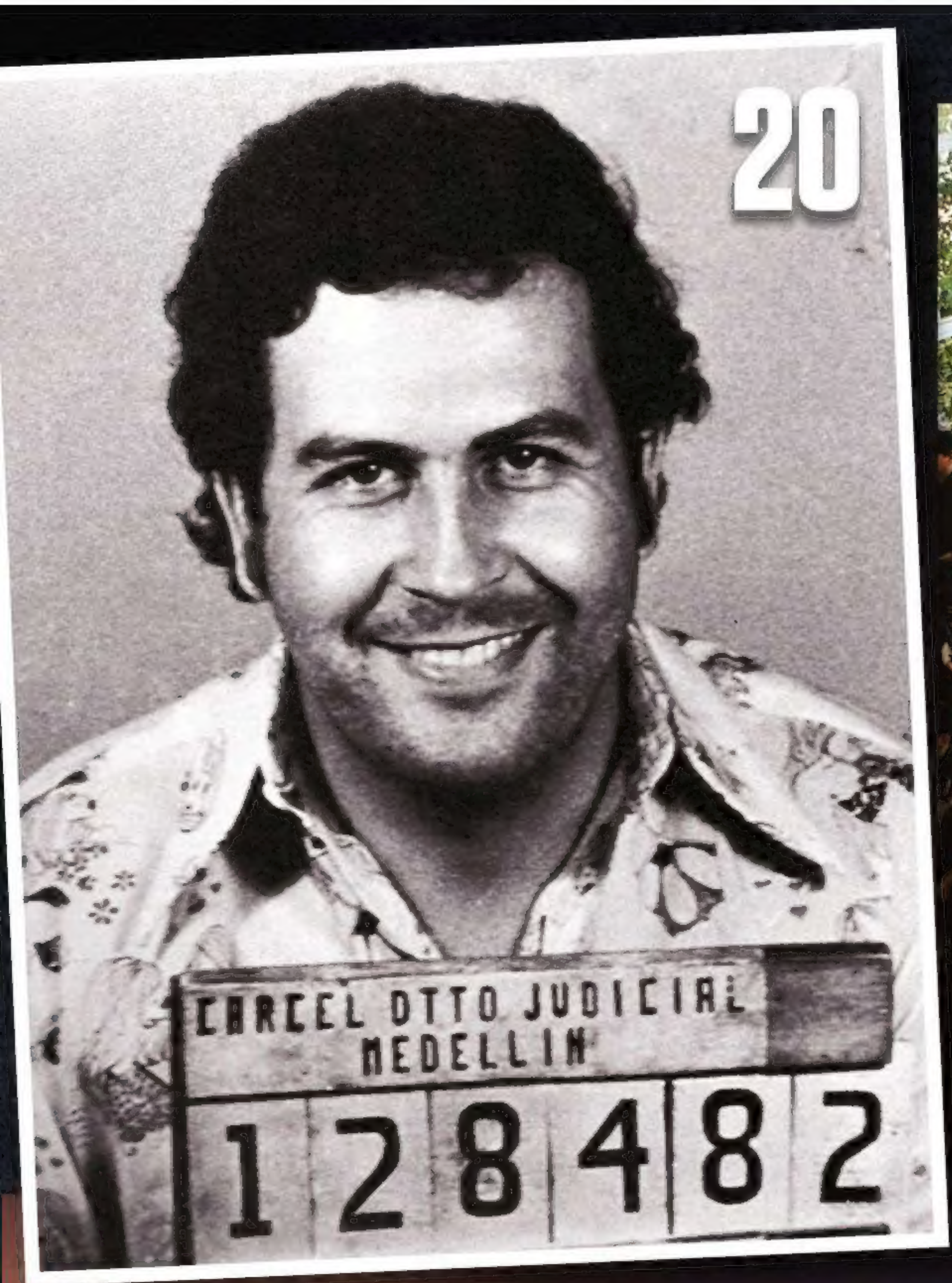
The Central Intelligence Agency has long been dogged by claims that it has been complicit with overseas drug traffickers

### 126 LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The global drug trade remains as lucrative and violent as ever. There are many new players but the game remains much the same









# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO DOPE

EMPIRES ARE BUILT ON IT, WARS FOUGHT OVER IT, LIVES DESTROYED BY IT, AND PEOPLE CAN'T SEEM TO GET ENOUGH OF IT. BEHOLD, THE UNDERWORLD EVOLUTION OF NARCOTICS

WORDS CHRISTIAN CIPOLLINI



Naturally occurring and synthetic, stimulants and depressants, medicinal and recreational... controlled substances run the gamut. From smack to molly, angel dust to ice, their nicknames are gaudy, and users come from every corner of society – rich and poor, intellects and the uneducated alike. Some seek euphoria; others to expand the mind. Some just want to dull their pain, and some want to talk to God. Narcotics, in their basic and ancient forms, have been used, or abused, since the dawn of civilisation. As Marc-Antoine Crocq, MD noted in his 2007 paper, 'Historical and cultural aspects of man's relationship with addictive drugs': "Our taste for addictive psychoactive substances is attested to in the earliest human records." Those who've provided the 'fix' have been labelled

everything from pusher to plug to Big Pharma. Over the course of the last two centuries in particular, drug use has been one of the most polarising, fiery, hotly debated issues that society has engaged in.

The phenomenon of drug trafficking is entrenched in everything from political theatre to pop culture. It's produced infamous figureheads crowned as 'Kingpins' and 'Lords', the likes of which have included Lucky Luciano, Nicky Barnes, Pablo Escobar and El Chapo. On the global stage, drug trafficking is often found at the core of international conspiracies, scandals and that murky abyss between truth and propaganda. It's an anomaly of which costs incurred by the legal, ethical and medical aspects seem insurmountable. So then, how did we end up in such a paradoxical and messy contemporary state of affairs when



Narcotics: the miracles of medicine, makers of millionaires and menace to society



it comes to the subject of narcotics? It's an epic tale filled with enough characters, conjecture, myths, factoids and sidequels to fill a library. Here is an overview of the pivotal turning points that took the promise of medical miracles to the shadowy, violent depths of society's underbelly. Behold, a condensed history of our world on dope...

### A GIFT FROM THE GODS

As the proverb says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions", and the story of the world's dope crisis couldn't be more akin to that statement. The global tailspin into problems we see today hark back to the 19th century with three major scientific breakthroughs:

1. The isolation of morphine (and codeine) from opium sap in 1805 by Friedrich Wilhelm Adam Sertürner. It was named after Morpheus, Greek god of dreams.
2. Diacetylmorphine synthesised from morphine in 1874 by English chemist Alder Wright (commercial exposure arrived in the 1890s when the Bayer Corporation marketed it as 'heroin').
3. The isolation of cocaine from coca leaves in 1859 by Albert Niemann.

When it came to surgery and trauma, the effects of opioids were unmatched in eliminating pain and inducing euphoria. Papaver somniferum, the variety of poppy that produces the gummy sap that holds the magical chemistry, proved to be a hot commodity indeed. International struggles for control of these goods spiked in the 1800s with two 'Opium Wars': Britain vs China (1839-42), followed by the tag team of Britain and France against China (1856-60). The West won control over the commerce, and it should be noted that before, during and ever since these early global struggles, the core and common denominator with drugs has always been money – who has it, who's making it, and who wants the lion's share of it.

The truly darker side of these so-called 'wonder drugs' reared its head when Civil War veterans were found to be addicted at alarming rates. Morphine dependency led to the marketing of heroin as a 'cure' for addiction, which, as it

Detective John McGraw and assistants examining opium and paraphernalia seized at an apartment in New York in 1923



ABOVE El Padrino. The infamous leader of Colombia's Medellín Cartel, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria





*Papaver somniferum*: the opium poppy flourishes in dry, warm regions and produces both opium gum and poppy seeds

became quite evident, couldn't have been further from the truth. The intravenous consumption of heroin acted faster on the brain and with substantially more powerful effect.

Though widely attributed to the Nixon administration, the phrase 'war on drugs' actually saw its first appearances around 1912 with small newspaper commentaries and op-eds. Within a few years, others, from both the private and public sector, took to the press, issuing calls to action and urging the government to wage such a war. The United States launched an effort to reduce the use and abuse of narcotics by passing the Harrison Act in 1914. The initiative did little more than put medical practitioners under tighter scrutiny, while generating more tax revenue for the Federal government. Moreover, World War I greatly hindered the international commerce of many pharmaceuticals, including the opiates and cocaine elixirs, jacking up the prices, and thus inadvertently laying the groundwork for a black market.

The US government bolstered the Harrison Act with a ratification in 1919, followed by the Jones-Miller Act in 1922, then the steadfast outlawing of heroin altogether in 1924. Meanwhile, Great Britain also made efforts to suppress the trafficking and addiction problem by passing the Dangerous Drugs Act in 1920. A consortium of countries came together and formed The League of Nations in 1920, which sought to solve many international issues, including the global drug trade. Dozens of countries gradually became member states of the League, but when it came to identifying and breaking up major drug rings, one of the most proactive and effective individual members was Egypt's Director of Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau, TW Russell Pasha. However, notwithstanding some impressive quantitative work to identify the exports, origins, and even traffickers of illicit substances, the League couldn't control the output by non-member nations (and/or rogue entities within its member nations).

## THE CADAVER CONNECTION

ONE OF THE MOST BIZARRE AND DISTURBING TACTICS USED IN THE HISTORY OF DRUG SMUGGLING WAS ACTUALLY A MYTH

In 1973 newspapers ran a shocking story: Heroin was being smuggled into the coffins and clothes of dead Vietnam servicemen, dubbed The Cadaver Connection. According to 'anonymous' government officials, the allegations were based on 'tips' given by informants. It turns out plenty of heroin had indeed been smuggled into the US from Southeast Asia in the early 1970s, and the masterminds of the ring were a group of retired military, but no evidence of such a despicable method of transport ever materialised. Interestingly, subsequent reporting and official statements quietly shifted to more verifiable facts. The tale itself, however, reemerged thanks to a 2000 magazine article and the 2007 movie *American Gangster*, both based on the life of drug lord Frank Lucas. Despite being scandalously good material for Hollywood, the entire 'cadaver' element was completely bogus.

One of the convicted ringleaders, Leslie 'Ike' Atkinson, aka Sgt Smack, claimed the scheme really involved using false-bottom bags and teakwood furniture. After his release from prison in 2006, he vehemently disputed both the cadaver story and most of Lucas's accounts. The source of the original legend, Atkinson said, was likely Lucas or his associates. Atkinson explained that Lucas did pay a visit to him in Thailand once – while another friend, carpenter Leon Ellis, was also there – working on the furniture. Atkinson, adamant in keeping the smuggling method secret, tried to thwart Lucas's curiosity with quick wit. "Lucas asked Leon what he was doing," Atkinson recalled, "and I spoke right up and said Leon was 'making coffins'. That's probably where Lucas got the whole coffin thing."



Leslie 'Ike' Atkinson (front), pictured in 1976 with co-defendants named in a multimillion dollar heroin-smuggling ring case



## BIRTH OF THE FIRST CARTEL

Despite all the laws, the demand never diminished. And of course with demand, there was always someone to supply. The perfect storm of variables was at play and it laid the foundation for the evolution of organised criminal dominance that still exists today (in ways that nobody could have imagined back then). Ineffective legislation, muddled international politics, misunderstanding of the real social problem... the landscape was ripe for a criminal market takeover. The origins of the underworld's control of narcotics can be summed up as cause and effect, and supply and demand: The discovery of wonder drugs eventually gave rise to dependency. Addiction gave rise to regulations. Prohibition gave rise to a black market. Opportunism gave rise to gangsterism.

The first utterances of the word 'cartel' (in relation to drugs, and with negative connotations) appeared in 1930s media coverage of legal pharmaceutical companies that had banded together to set prices and argue against any international pacts limiting narcotic production. However, the world's first semblance of a sophisticated, illicit 'drug syndicate' can be traced back to a man named Arnold Rothstein, aka The Big Bankroll. Rothstein funded all sorts of underworld business endeavours. He is best remembered for his alleged involvement in the 1919 World Series scandal, and his untimely and unsolved death in 1928. The business tycoon possessed acute skills in the art of spotting and capitalising on lucrative opportunities. Plus, he had an eye for talent, accruing a virtual who's who of up-and-coming criminals under his tutelage, some of whom would evolve into gangland superstars. These minions were honing their skills in vice, and Rothstein was bankrolling them. When it came to narcotics, Rothstein wasted no time in grabbing a large market share. By 1921, he had a tight, reliable crew of young agents making the arduous trek from New York all the way to China via Europe to establish partnerships and logistics for the importation of opium and cocaine – direct from the source. The first of these globetrotting emissaries included George Uffner, Sidney Stajer and Jacob 'Yasha' Katzenberg (within a few years, the predominantly Jewish drug team would grow to include notorious bootlegger Jack 'Legs' Diamond and a faction of Italians, among them a then-unknown mobster by the name of Lucky Luciano).

If the boys got busted, Arnie had bail posted immediately. Additionally, and with his broad influence into political and media realms, he was able to keep the public exposure to a minimum. He was no saint, and it's doubtful he provided any of these safeguards for any reason beyond 'protecting his assets' (Rothstein often required his agents to take out insurance policies, which he held, as an added security measure). Among the earliest and most prominent opium magnates he aligned with were the Ezra brothers, Judah and Isaac. Jewish British nationals, the twin brothers maintained residence in Shanghai and San Francisco, but the base of operations was the family owned, very profitable large opium plantations in China. The methods of moving 'product' weren't all that different to today's; drugs would enter the United States, predominantly through New York and San Francisco, hidden in everything from steamer trunks to machine parts, and be further dispersed across the network via air, land and sea routes.

Following Rothstein's death, the network expanded but the authorities had managed to catch a glimpse of just how



Following the arrest and confession of Judah Ezra, police in San Francisco discovered \$50,000 worth of opium concealed in tins

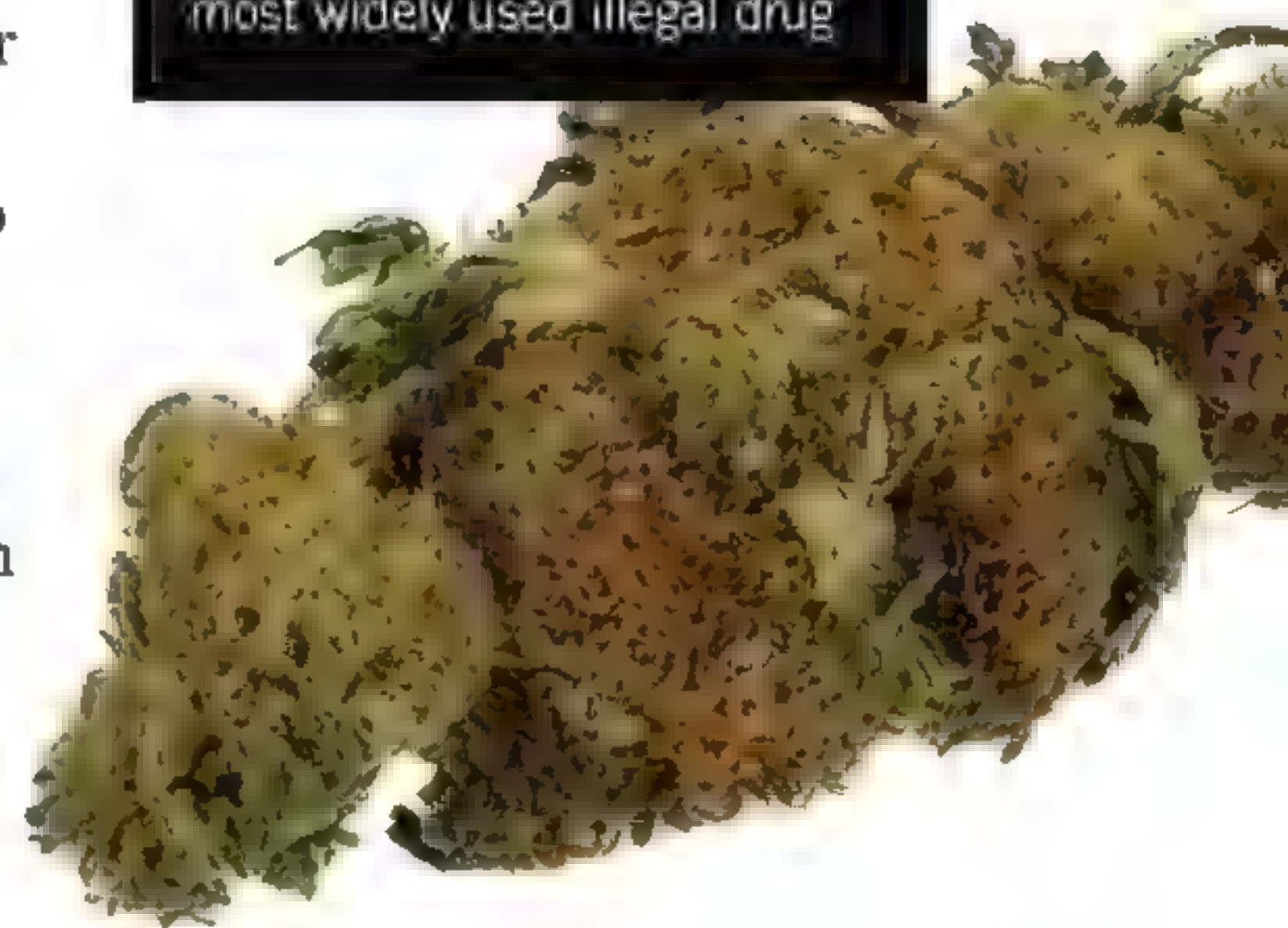


ABOVE Cristoforo Rubino, an alleged heroin dealer and associate of Lucky Luciano, was shot dead in July 1958, before he could testify

BELOW Cannabis, the UK's most widely used illegal drug

large-scale his organisation had become. Even with all the outcry and political promises made (from little town halls to international conferences) to subdue the problem, the outlaws were still leaps and bounds ahead of the game. Then, the figurative hammer came down. The year was 1930, enter Harry J Anslinger. A zealot if there ever was one, Anslinger took charge of a centralised narcotics division of the US Treasury, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the precursor to the DEA. Why the Treasury department? Simple. Millions of dollars in illicit narcotics were being exchanged and Uncle Sam wasn't getting a piece of the action. Anslinger's agents were markedly different to their FBI counterparts in terms of tactics and style. The FBN didn't play by straight and narrow rules, nor did the agents necessarily have the 'WASP image'. They got dirty, went deep undercover.

**“MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN ILLICIT NARCOTICS WERE BEING EXCHANGED AND UNCLE SAM WASN'T GETTING A PIECE OF THE ACTION”**





# DOPE: FROM CRUDE TO COMMODITY

THE COMMODITY CHAIN OF ILLICIT NARCOTICS FOLLOWS A RELATIVELY STANDARD SERIES OF STEPS FROM RAW MATERIALS TO THE END CONSUMER

## 1 CULTIVATION AND SOURCE MATERIALS

The route to the black market begins in one of two ways: agriculturally or from chemical sources. Farmers harvest the crop and prep for buyers/producers (eg a base paste is extracted from coca leaves; opium sap is collected in raw form) or chemical suppliers sell the source materials for the production of synthetics (eg ecstasy, crystal meth).

## 2 REFINERIES AND LABS

Once the producer has raw materials the processing phase begins. Labs convert the raw and base substances into desired forms. Depending on the drug, this phase includes purification (eg cocaine) or extraction (morphine from opium sap), crystallisation, pill pressing, etc. Most narcotics require sourced chemicals at this stage to complete the production process.

## 3 EXPORTERS AND WHOLESALERS

Bricks, bales and crates of the pure product have to reach their ultimate destination and that's where the logistical element comes into the chain. Shipments of finished product are coordinated with receiving brokers, and the modes of concealment and transportation are established. This step may or may not directly involve the actual smugglers.

## 4 TRAFFICKERS AND SMUGGLERS

These are the people who physically move the product from the wholesaler to brokers and/or distributors, and can include pilots, skippers, drivers and drug mules via planes, trains and automobiles, as well as tunnels, boats and submarines. Once the mode of transport is determined, the drugs are picked up, shipped and delivered.

## 7 THE RETAILER

There can be several stages of horizontal retail exchanges before the product moves vertical, but essentially this step is where drugs like cocaine and heroin are adulterated or 'cut' with fillers (everything from inositol to quinine to baby powder to aspirin and so on).

## 6 DISTRIBUTION CELLS

The pure product is delivered into the hands of a wholesale distribution entity, be it Mafia, gang or cartel cell. Every stage has 'mark up' – this is where the price begins its ascent. Distributors may sell for cash or on consignment, and deal with both retailers and other wholesalers.



Drug baron Giuseppe Catania Ponsiglione in 1989 with pilots, smugglers and 1400lbs of cocaine

## 5 THE INTERMEDIARIES

Brokers or middlemen are often the next stop on the supply chain. Once the drugs arrive at a specific destination, the broker coordinates with the wholesale distributors; money collection, further transport, etc. Their duties can include physically receiving and inspecting the shipments and money laundering.

## 8 THE STREET DEALER

The dopeman, plug or pusher purchases the product from the retailer, with the purity level already decreased. Additional cutting and repackaging may occur at this level before the product is put on the street.



1936 G-Men collector's card depicting the perceived image of a typical drug dealer

## 9 THE CONSUMER

The final destination in the drug trafficking process is, of course, the one arguably most historically demonised by society as junkies and fiends. From dimebags to 8-balls, the potency, quality and prices vary by the time the end user enters the spectrum. It is, however, the consumer's habit/demand that continues the supply chain existence.



An addict applies a makeshift tourniquet and takes heroin intravenously

Anslinger quickly established an authoritarian position in the politics and propaganda of waging a war on drugs. The dirty little secret? Much of this so-called war was based on ethnic, racial and cultural bias; very little on science, medicine or psychology. The element of criminality was underscored by other intangibles such as discrimination and xenophobia (laws against 'opium dens' in San Francisco aimed at the Chinese immigrants, for example) that ensued long before Anslinger's reign. America's new 'drug czar' did, however, become the undisputed champion in the art of (mis)information dissemination. "No one knows, when he places a marijuana cigarette to his lips, whether he will become a joyous reveller in musical heaven, a mad insensate, a calm philosopher or a murderer," Anslinger claimed in 1937.

## SHIFTING WINDS OF CHANGE

Organised crime as a whole underwent numerous transitions from the early 1930s through to the 1950s, a natural ebb and flow. As the times changed, so too did

the main players in the dope game. Where in New York, for example, the Jewish racketeers were once dominant in narcotics, the secret 'black book' lists of suspected traffickers consistently gained more pages of Italian names. The shifts weren't all-encompassing, nor a mass exodus of any one faction to or from the business, but subtle signs of vicissitude were apparent.

In contrast, as the founder of The Gangster Report website Scott Burnstein explains, in regions like Detroit and Chicago a large number of Jewish mobsters remained in drug trafficking. "If you were Jewish and got out of the rackets, you 'sold' your business to the Italians," Burnstein says. "But if you stayed in after Prohibition, you dove head first into narcotics and partnered with them [Italians]."

Similarly, former bootleggers in the Southwest and across the border in Mexico were shifting their operations to marijuana and Mexican opium. One of the most famous drug-trafficking bosses was Ignacia Jasso, aka La Nacha, Mexico's first 'dope queen'. She operated from the late 1920s and supplied drugs for more than 50 years. Some groups even established domestic labs to synthesise,



Police in Portland, Oregon showing off a cocaine and weapons haul in 1987



**BELOW** Drug subs, or narco-submarines, are built by traffickers to smuggle drugs, particularly between Colombia and Mexico



The United States issued a list of 'most wanted' Colombian traffickers in 1989, which featured members of both the Cali and Medellín cartels



## “ THE PUBLIC’S DEMAND FOR HARSHER PUNISHMENTS GAINED TRACTION AGAIN ”

### WAR IS WAGED

In November 1964, Dr Stanford Pulrang was quoted as saying, “Pushing narcotics is worse than rape, worse than murder, worse than kidnapping. Death is too light a sentence. We need a federal Lindbergh Law to stop dope selling”, encapsulating the public’s fear of the rapidly growing trade.

Heroin was largely demonised as an inner-city epidemic. On the peripheral ran the counterculture movement, which embraced marijuana and the synthetic (and very unpredictable) lysergic acid diethylamide, aka LSD. And an old substance was beginning a resurgence – cocaine. All taken into consideration, the public’s demand for harsher punishments gained traction yet again, and earned catchphrase status by the 1970s when Richard Nixon made the ‘war on drugs’ one of his outspoken goals.

Empires generally don’t remain on top forever. So, as the decade approached its end, the Mafia monopoly over heroin had already begun to wane, if ever so slightly, because the dawn of ‘Cocaine Cowboys’ and the crack era were creeping across the world. Commercial cocaine production largely emanated from the coca plants growing naturally in South America’s Andes; early attempts to grow it elsewhere were

refine and carry out a step that was rather shocking to law enforcement at the time – cutting. But eventually the epicentre of drug supply, smuggling and processing veered towards Europe.

Looking back on the history of the trade, *The Arizona Republic* newspaper reported in 1979 that “The French Connection was forged by the Mafia, which inherited the narcotics traffic from Jewish dealers.”

By the late 1950s, the combination of Turkish opium, labs in Marseilles, and Corsican and Sicilian gangsters streamlined heroin supplies. The broadly dubbed ‘French Connection’ remained in operation throughout the 1960s and, arguably, maintained its place as the most effective trafficking matrix. Every entity’s supply primarily came from the Mafia, but not without the underpinnings of dissent brewing beneath the surface. The narcotic control of American markets took yet another turn when African-American factions looked to bypass Mafia suppliers. This was a delicate relationship, underscored by tension, that saw periodic spikes of dissidence and violence from time to time, climaxing in the 1970s with some black gangsters successfully cutting out the Mob (most notably in New York).





**ABOVE** Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, aka El Chapo. The Sinaloa Cartel boss was convicted in the United States in 2019 and sentenced to life without parole, plus 30 years

**BELOW** *Erythroxylum coca*, the coca plant most commonly used for cocaine production



usually in vain, with the exception of Formosa (Taiwan), which was under Japan's control in the late 1800s through to the early 1900s (and often where Arnold Rothstein's crew of original dopemen would acquire it).

Traffickers who once made fortunes with marijuana were becoming part of a vast web of cocaine traffic originating in Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. Cocaine had all the earmarks of success: expensive, high return on investment, wealthy clientele, destined to be the fashionable glamour drug of the rich and famous. An '8-ball' (1/8oz) of cocaine sold for around \$5 in 1912 (approximately \$200 in today's money).

Carl T Rowan, an American journalist and government official who won an Emmy for his documentary *Drug Abuse: America's 64 Billion Dollar Curse*, summed up the problem in 1989 saying: "We can't accept the truth that a miserably poor farmer in the Andes is saying, 'I'm growing coca plants, because I can sell that crop at a profit. If somebody wants to turn it into cocaine to satisfy some socialite in Hollywood, or Martha's Vineyard, that's not my problem.'"

The popularity of the drug rose after the early 1970s but it reached its zenith in the 1980s. Mindboggling and frightening to those studying the trend, 'coke' turned poor men into billionaires with intricate organisations constantly evolving the art of production, smuggling, export and sales.

Deals made between the Colombians (Cali and Medellín Cartels) and Mexican syndicates created routes through Mexico, while thrill-seeking American pilots took gigs flying contraband via the Bahamas and Caribbean. By the time governments tightened security on land borders, especially



Going on a trip: sheets of LSD blotters – drops of lysergic acid diethylamide on squares of blotting paper

the US, where approximately 80% of illicit dope was going, another form of cocaine appeared – crack. That was 1981 and within a couple of years the cheaper, extremely powerful alternative hit the lower-income demographic with fury. It was at this time, says Scott Burnstein, that the African-American drug lords soared to the top. The trade in crack severely diminished the Italian Mob's influence in the US drug economy and the Mafia's stranglehold on domestic drug distribution was decimated.

Violence is an unfortunate, innate characteristic of a subculture that polices itself; the money and business is more valuable than human life. That is a fact applicable to everything from the Mafia to street gangs to drug rings. There was always bloodshed in the heroin trade, but cocaine's rise brought an unprecedented level of violence. The harshest Federal pressure on cartel activity came following the 1985 murder of DEA agent 'Kiki' Camarena. From there, more shifts and power vacuums ensued in Mexico. In Colombia, Pablo Escobar and his allies – 'Los Extraditables' – declared war, and the world saw the most brazen, terroristic violence associated yet. The one thing all cartel kingpins fear most is extradition agreements. In fact, a slogan of Los Extraditables in 1990 was 'Preferimos una tumba en Colombia, A un calabozo en los Estados Unidos' – 'We prefer a grave in Colombia to a dungeon in the United States.'

By 1989 though, Joaquín Guzmán's Sinaloa faction in Mexico began mastering tunnel-building under the US-Mexican border. Still barely a blip on the larger radar (as Pablo Escobar was the reigning media subject of the day), El Chapo, as he was commonly known, was creating what evolved as perhaps the most powerful recognised drug-trafficking organisation the world has ever seen.

Over the last century or more the only constants in the narcotics trafficking paradigm have been supply and demand. The players change, methods of delivery change, even the 'in' drug changes, but the game itself never ends. Too much is at stake, from entire gross national products to ego-fuelled personal kingdoms, dope is woven into the fabric of global economics. Organised crime requires innovation and adaptation to the changing elements of both the licit and illicit environment. Of all the vice in the world, dope has reigned champion, and, as such, those who wanted to survive in the contemporary underworld embraced and aligned with the powerful ruling class of narcos, from the Mob to motorcycle clubs, prison gangs to Sicilian Mafia, the list goes on. Its evidence can be found everywhere. Now, go meet some of the prolific figures and episodes of the dope macrocosm...

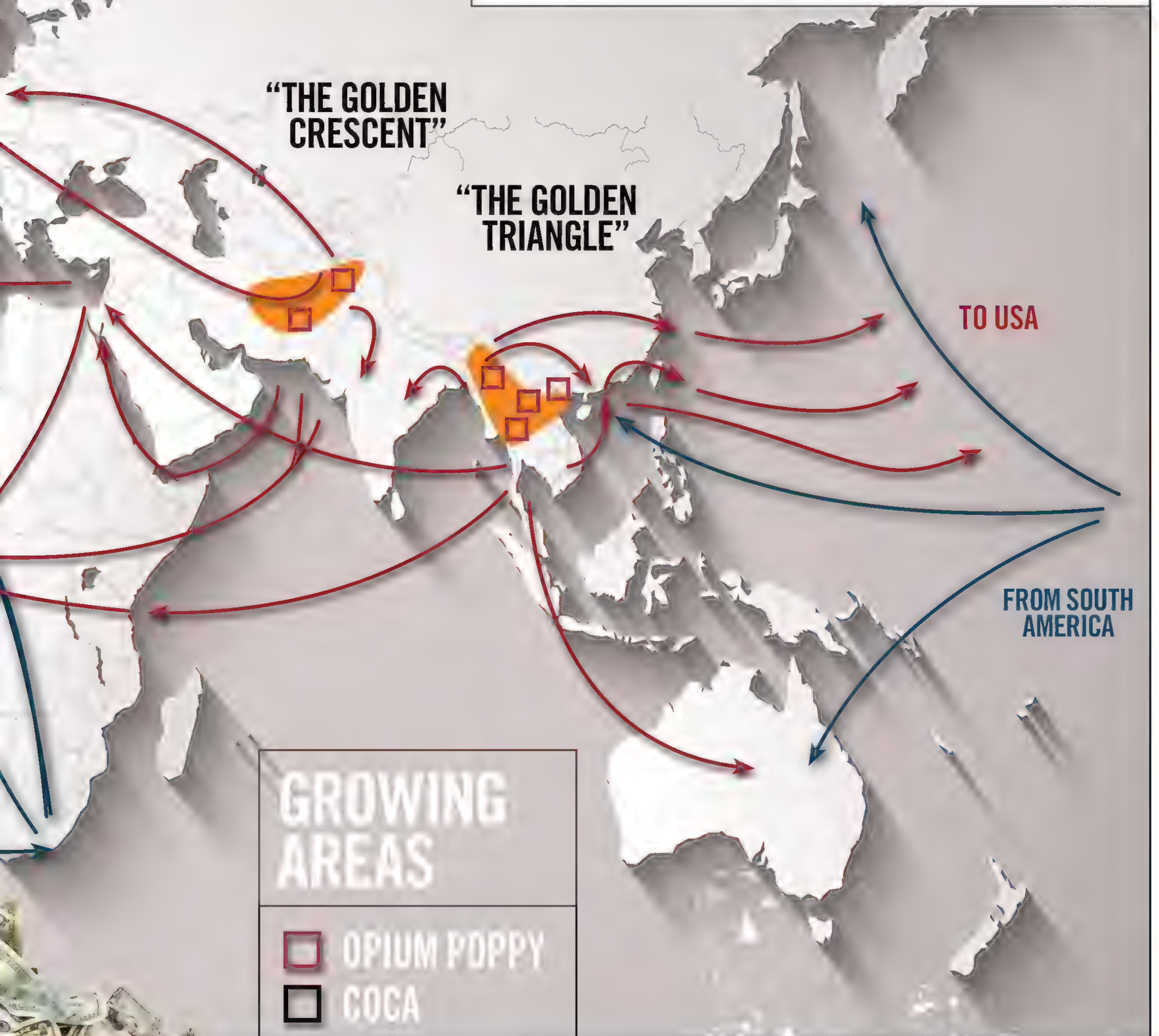






# INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRADE

DISCOVER WHERE DRUGS ARE PRODUCED AND THE  
GLOBAL DISTRIBUTION FLOWS OF SOME OF THE WORLD'S  
MOST POWERFUL CARTELS





# GANGS & DRUG LORDS

## 20 THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COCAINE KING

We set the record straight about Colombia's murderous narco-terrorist, Pablo Escobar, and his Medellín cronies

## 30 "THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT MY FATHER"

We talk to Pablo Escobar's first-born son about murders, millions and kidnapping

## 36 GODMOTHER OF COCAINE

In the 1970s and 1980s, Griselda Blanco was at the forefront of the Medellín Cartel's move into the US's burgeoning cocaine market

## 42 CALI-MONEY, MURDER & MAYHEM

The Cali Cartel was one of the biggest, wealthiest and bloodiest criminal networks in history. No crime was off-limits. No enemy was beyond their reach

## 48 LOS URABEÑOS

As paramilitary and guerrilla organisations demobilise in Colombia, an upstart from the north has become one of the country's most feared gangs

## 54 PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL

They started life as a prison

gang but they have grown to become Brazil's most feared criminals

## 62 THE RISE OF EL CHAPO

The world of the Mexican drug cartels is deadly and super competitive. To succeed as a Godfather, you need to see your chance and seize it

## 72 THE SINALOA CARTEL

The story behind the world's most powerful drug trafficking organisation and how it has turned Mexico into a war zone

## 78 THE FLORES BROTHERS VS EL CHAPO

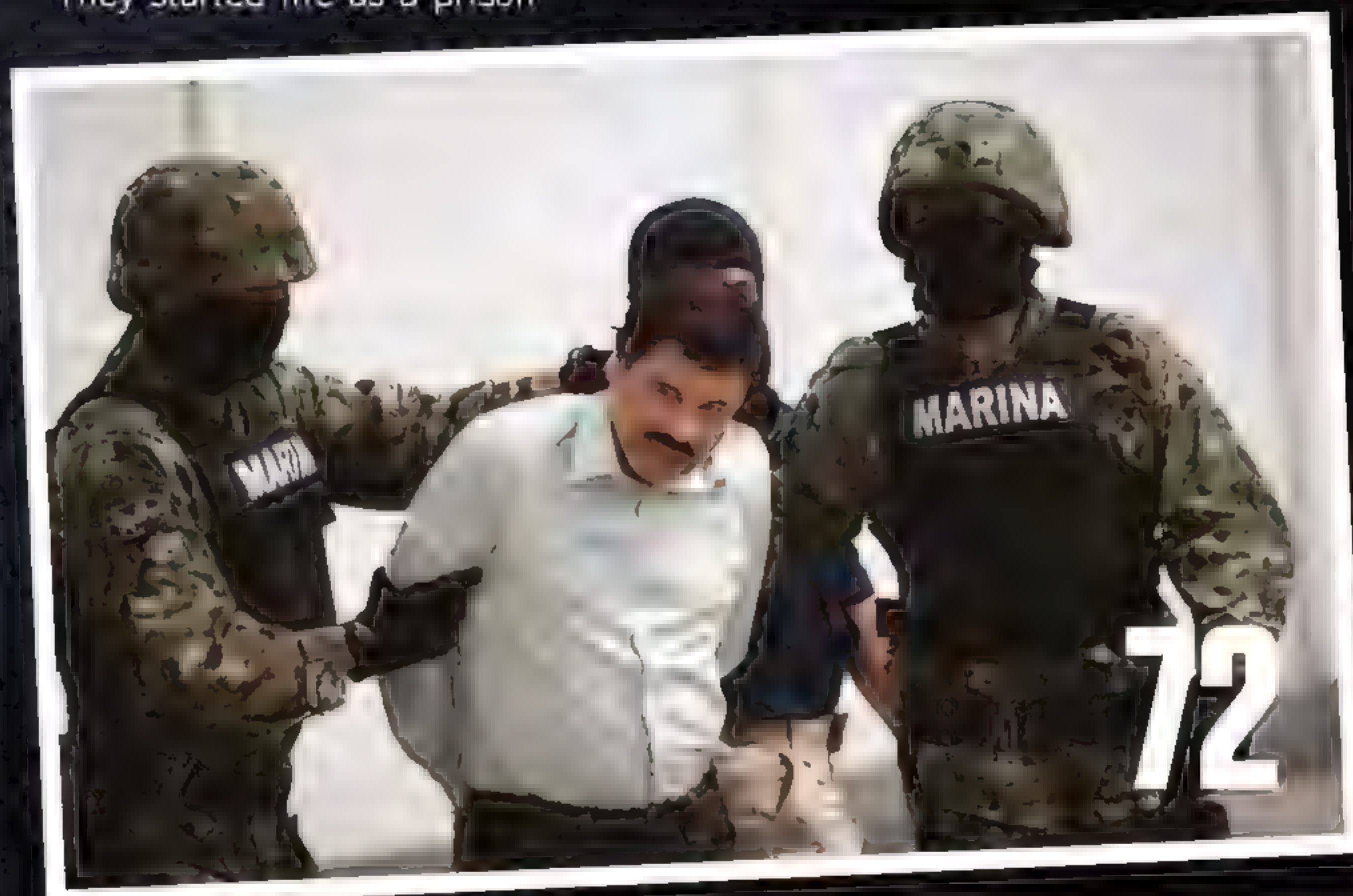
The Flores brothers climbed to the top of a drug empire and lived a glamorous narco lifestyle, but a bloodthirsty war between cartels forced them to become part of a case that sent dozens of high-ranking cartel members to prison

## 84 LOS ZETAS

Brutal bloody chaos like you've never seen before – what happened when Mexico's Elite Commandos switched sides to form their own cartel

## 90 GLOBAL COMPETITION

Latin America is not alone in producing drug cartels – discover some of the biggest from around the world







20



90



54



36



84

METRO DADE  
POLICE DEPARTMENT







CARCEL OTTO JUDICIAL  
MEDELLIN



# PLATA O PLOMO: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COCAINE KING

IDOLISED BY SOME, HIS CRIMINAL EXPLOITS GLORIFIED IN THE MEDIA, IT'S TIME TO SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT ABOUT COLOMBIA'S MURDEROUS NARCO-TERRORIST, **PABLO ESCOBAR**, AND HIS MEDELLÍN CRONIES

WORDS BEN BIGGS

**D**riven from his safe house, bloody, terrified and surrounded by strangers, Pablo Escobar's exit from this world wasn't entirely dissimilar to his birth. Green-uniformed men wielding automatic weapons leered over his corpse, ecstatic as they squatted to pose for their victory photo. Meanwhile, the boss of the notorious Medellín Cartel bled out at their feet, sprawled awkwardly on his side with outstretched arms, his shirt hauled up to his armpits to expose a pudgy white midriff.

He hadn't been this pathetic since he was pulled from his mother, just a day over 44 years before his ignominious demise on that dirty terracotta rooftop in Barrio Los Olivos. Some king he was now.

So hated was Escobar at that time that groups clamoured to claim responsibility for putting the final bullet through his ear. Search Bloc (Bloque de Búsqueda) was formed in 1986 by the then-president Virgilio Barco Vargas, with the single objective of capturing Escobar. They were made up



of Colombian police officers with special training from the army and, with the help of other organisations including the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), had traced Escobar to a middle-class neighbourhood in Medellín after a 16-month search following his escape from prison. It was Search Bloc that cornered the drug lord and his last, loyal bodyguard, 'El Limón', then chased him across the rooftop. It's members of Search Bloc who can be seen in a celebratory mood in that famous photo, taken just minutes after Escobar had fallen. So surely it was a Search Bloc operative who fired the fatal shot?

Los Pepes, however, had a stake in this. The recently formed vigilante group made up of Escobar's enemies – and there was a lot of bad blood by the end – had collaborated with Search Bloc in the hunt for the Medellín boss. American journalist and author of *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw*, Mark Bowden, described them as, "Some extralegal muscle... who didn't mind crossing the lines of legality and morality that Pablo so blithely ignored." And that was putting it mildly. CIA documents released in 2008 revealed that the Colombian National Police director general, General Miguel Antonio Gómez Padilla, had worked with the leader of Los Pepes, Fidel Castaño, in building intelligence on the cartel and its leader. The beat on the street, so to speak, was that Los Pepes took Escobar down. It counted rival drug traffickers, ruthless terrorists and other violent criminals among its number, many wanted for serious crimes themselves and who preferred to avoid the kind of publicity that apprehending the world's most powerful narco would attract. It's not like anyone from Los Pepes was eager to feature on Colombia's Canal Uno news channel any more than they might have been already.

Escobar's family, meanwhile, were adamant that his death was suicide. He had told his brothers that he would take his own life if he was ever cornered and faced extradition to the US. Apparently, he had been very specific about this, saying that he would 'shoot himself through the ear'. Was the way he died just an eerie coincidence?



ABOVE Escobar had a zoo on his estate. One of his unfortunate legacies were the hippos, which reproduced after his death, began to roam freely and had to be culled

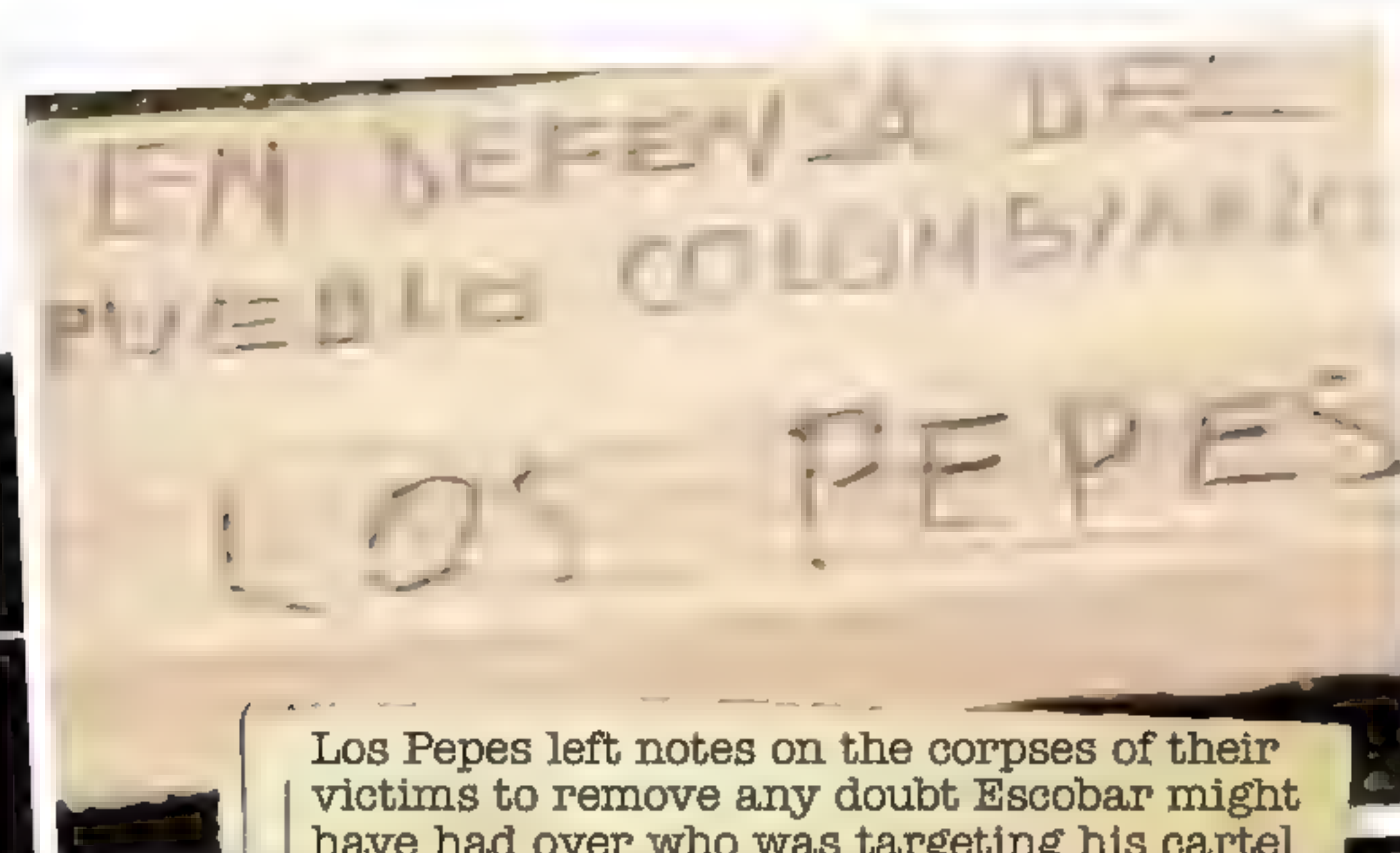
## THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

'LOS PEPE'S' WERE TRAINED, ARMED, DEADLY, AND HELL-BENT ON ENDING ESCOBAR AND THE MEDELLÍN CARTEL

Billionaires and leaders of industry usually don't get to their positions without rubbing a few people up the wrong way, so you can imagine that the enemies of a calculating and murderous drug lord like Escobar came as thick and as fast as the money he made. The Castaño brothers were once tight with Escobar but as a right-wing paramilitary, younger brother, Carlos wasn't comfortable with Escobar's warming relations with other paramilitary groups and his escalating war against the state. After Escobar rightly suspected discontent in the cartel and tried to have the Castaño brothers assassinated in 1992, they formed 'Los Pepes' – Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar ('Persecuted by Pablo Escobar'). Spearheaded by the Castaño brothers, its ranks

drew together Medellín's rival drug traffickers, vigilantes seeking revenge on the cartel for the murder of friends and family, and paramilitaries like Diego 'Don Berna' Murillo Bejarano. Even members of the Colombian police force, which had suffered hundreds of casualties at the hands of Escobar's cold-blooded campaign of violence against the authorities, got involved. In the background, providing intelligence and resources to Los Pepes, members of the USA's own CIA and DEA pulled strings in the hope that the demise of America's enemy number one would be hastened. Arguably it worked, as a year later a paranoid Escobar was flushed out into the open and shot dead on a rooftop, although their methods can hardly be condoned.

Los Pepes' primary objective was to kill Pablo Escobar, no simple task in itself given the army of men and fortifications he surrounded himself with. So their secondary objective was to hit him where it hurt – in his wallet. Deploying the same bloody tactics Escobar would use against his rivals, they tortured and murdered the cartel's lawyers, accountants, and his hitmen, but also anyone close to Escobar. The 300 people Los Pepes murdered included his daughter's music teacher and a young teenager who befriended the kingpin, despite the group's claims that they didn't murder innocents. The Colombian government regarded Los Pepes in the same light as the Medellín Cartel, although no member of the group has ever been tried for their crimes.



Los Pepes left notes on the corpses of their victims to remove any doubt Escobar might have had over who was targeting his cartel





In March 1993, as the net began to close on Escobar, police shoot dead ruthless Medellín enforcer, Mario Castaño Molina.



Carlos Lehder, in the pilot seat of a light aircraft, which he used to smuggle cocaine up from Central to North America.

### THE KING IS DEAD

Colombia's *El Espectador* newspaper, perhaps still feeling too close to the cartel for comfort, ran with a neutral, "...Y cayó Escobar" ("...And Escobar fell"). But the death of the Medellín boss resonated far beyond Colombia's borders. Panama's *La Prensa* newspaper celebrated his death with "¡Oh, Júbilo inmortal!" ("Oh, immortal joy!"), while the *New York Daily News* spat "Good riddance" on its front page. Across the world, Escobar's downfall was met with contempt, jubilation, or was relegated to a secondary hit on the front page. But in parts of his home town of Medellín, ordinary people reacted very differently.

Over the years, Escobar had acted upon a social conscience that flew in the face of his capacity for violence and cold-blooded murder. He had donated huge amounts of cash to the community, building houses, hospitals and parks for the poorest in Medellín. This benefactor, who'd rescued hundreds of people from the streets (in a bid to launch an ill-fated political career) and given thousands of children hope of escaping extreme poverty on their own football pitches (as a way of laundering the vast sums of money the cartel was making), was an icon to many. Quite literally: residents of 'Barrio Pablo Escobar' would keep a picture of their unlikely saviour by their bedside along with their crucifixes and Virgin Mary figurines. They'd light candles and say prayers for a man whose victims included women and children, murdered without him feeling the slightest prick of conscience. A man who held most of Colombia in a grip of terror and who had poisoned communities along his trafficking routes for thousands of kilometres. He was so highly regarded in his native Medellín that his funeral befitted a folk hero, with thousands in attendance trying to get a glimpse of a legend through the glass as he passed in his hearse. How did this notorious kingpin get to be so loved, respected, feared and reviled by so many?

## THE CARTEL IN NUMBERS

DURING ITS REIGN OF TERROR, THE MEDELLÍN CARTEL RACKED UP SOME STAGGERING FIGURES

# 80%

AT ITS PEAK, THE MEDELLÍN CARTEL WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MAJORITY OF THE WORLD'S COCAINE PRODUCTION

# 15 TONS

EVERY DAY, THE CARTEL SMUGGLED AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF COCAINE ACROSS THE BORDERS INTO THE US

# \$420 MILLION

NEARLY HALF A BILLION DOLLARS OF ILLICIT CASH POURED INTO THE CARTEL'S COFFERS EVERY WEEK

# 3,000

## ASSASSINATIONS

JUST ONE OF ESCOBAR'S HITMEN, POPEYE, BOASTED OF ARRANGING THE MURDERS OF THOUSANDS FOR THE CARTEL

# 2,600 MURDERS

UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE CARTEL, MEDELLÍN'S ANNUAL MURDER RATE SHOT UP, TO BECOME THE HIGHEST IN COLOMBIA BY 1989





# KING OF THE CARTEL

ESCOBAR'S NARCO-TRAFFICKING NETWORK HAD A SIMPLE HIERARCHY THAT PLACED HIM AT THE TOP, IN ABSOLUTE CONTROL



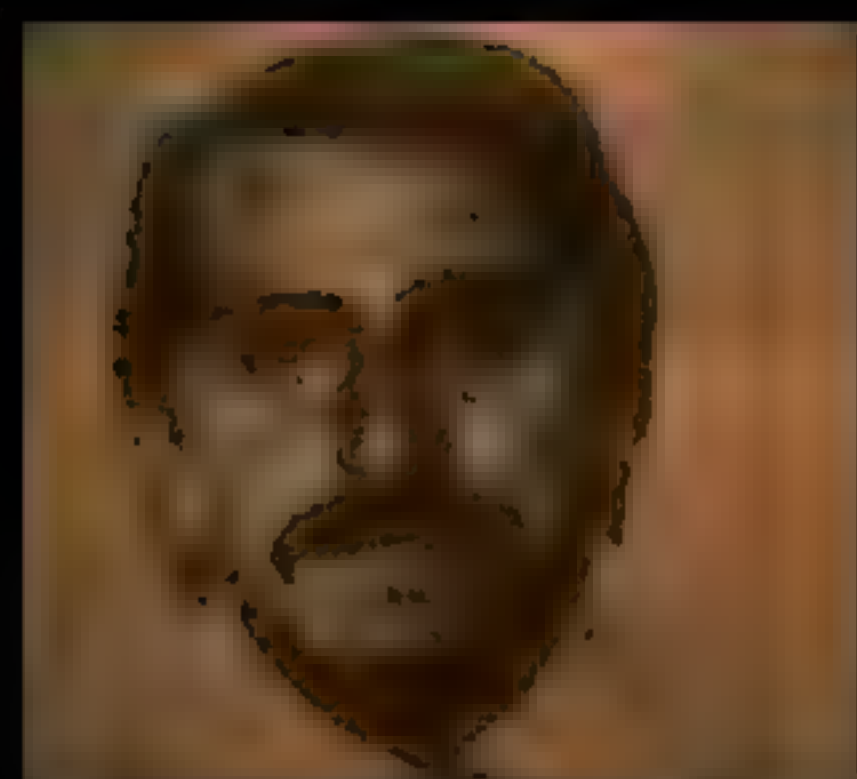
## UNDISPUTED BOSS

### PABLO EMILIO ESCOBAR GAVIRIA

NICKNAME: EL PATRÓN

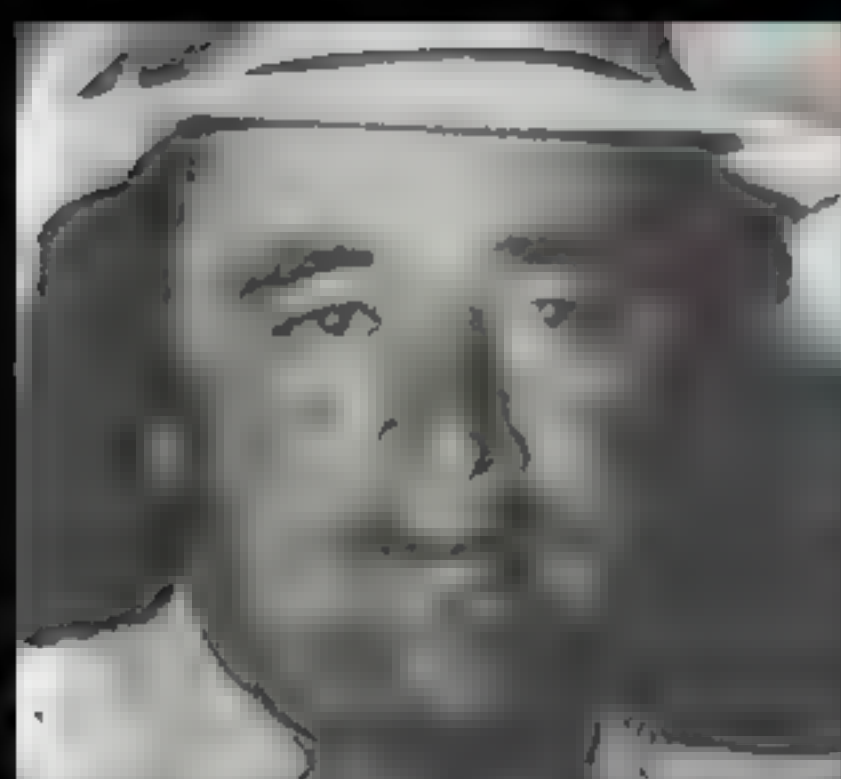
Unlike many criminal organisations, there was never any question over Escobar's sole leadership of the Medellín Cartel. This divisive drug lord held the cartel together, and his death saw it evaporate into history.

## LIEUTENANTS



### GUSTAVO DE JESÚS GAVIRIA RIVERO

Gustavo was Escobar's cousin and close associate in the cartel. His journey into drug-trafficking infamy ran almost parallel with Escobar's. Within the Medellín Cartel, he took care of cash flow and trade routes.



### JOSÉ GONZALO RODRÍGUEZ GACHA

NICKNAME: EL MEXICANO

Gacha began his career as an emerald smuggler, before moving into drug trafficking. He moved to Medellín in 1976 where he was introduced to Escobar. He directed cocaine trafficking from Central America to California and was the cartel's de facto military leader.



### OCHOA BROTHERS

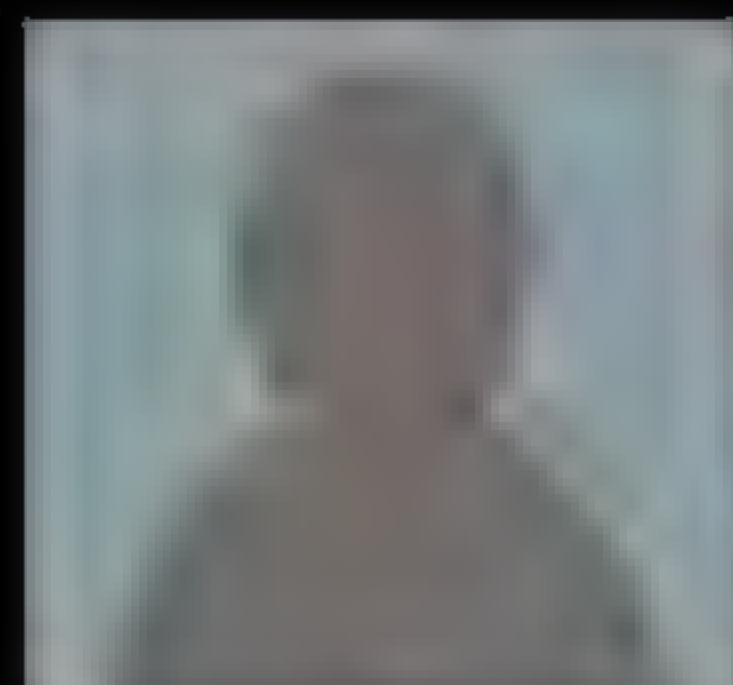
Juan David Ochoa Vásquez, along with his younger brothers Jorge Luis and Fabio, were from a reasonably wealthy family of restaurateurs and cattle-ranchers before they turned to drug trafficking in the 1970s. They helped take care of manufacturing, distribution and marketing.



### CARLOS LEHDER RIVAS

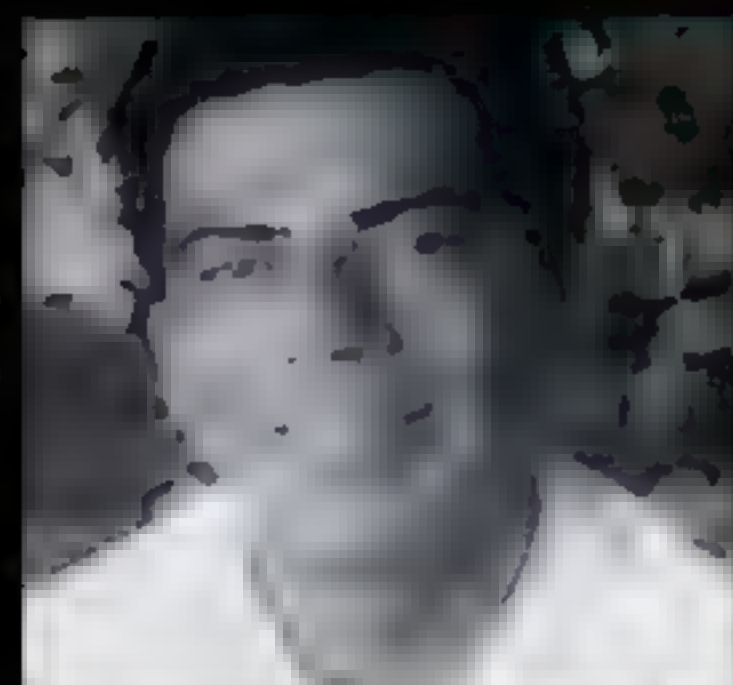
Lehder is a Colombian of German descent who went on to found the 'Muerte a Secuestradores' paramilitary group. He famously met future Medellín associate George Jung in a Connecticut prison and convinced him to smuggle cocaine instead of marijuana.

## TRUSTED HENCHMEN AND ASSOCIATES



### CARLOS MARIO HENAO VALLEJO

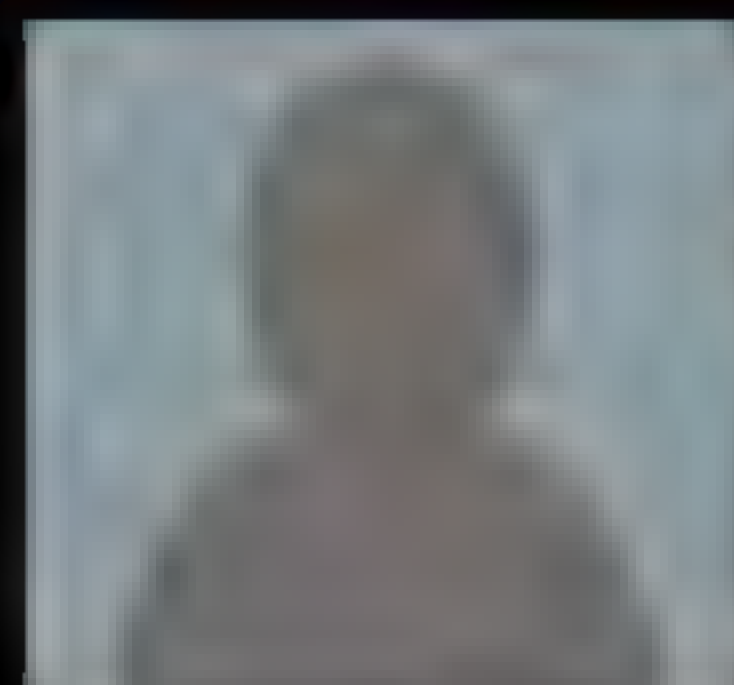
Escobar liked to keep the cartel as much a family affair as possible. His brother-in-law began working for him long before the cartel was formed.



### JUAN RAMÓN MATTÁ-BALLESTEROS

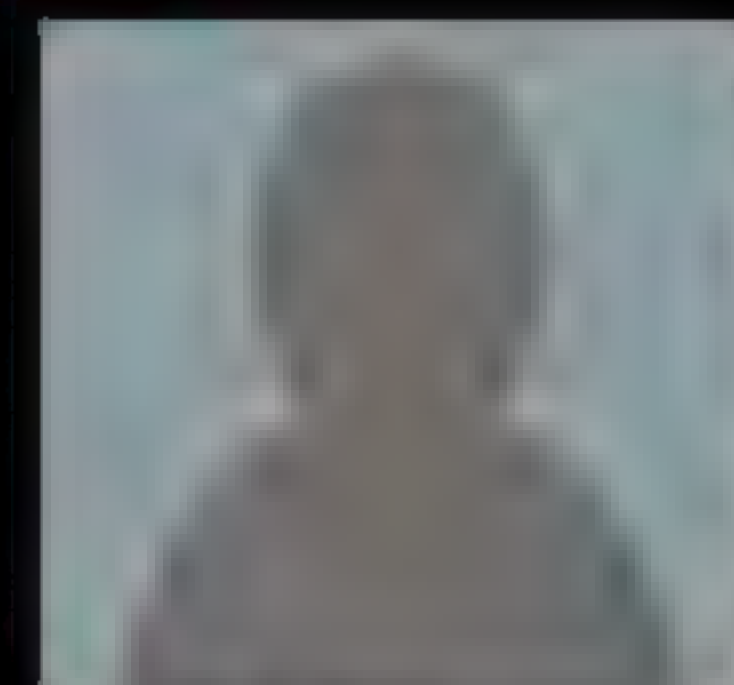
NICKNAME: EL NEGRO

Connected both Medellín and Guadalajara cartels, El Negro used his wealth to fund anti-government rebels in Nicaragua.



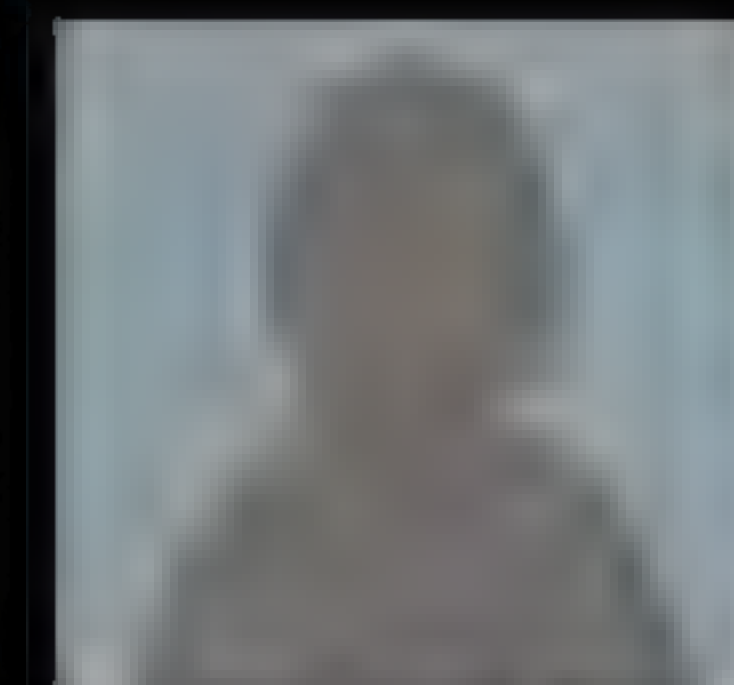
### GILBERTO MOLINA MORENO

Molina was an unscrupulous Colombian emerald kingpin who had ties to the Medellín Cartel as well as drug-smuggling operations.



### CASTAÑO BROTHERS

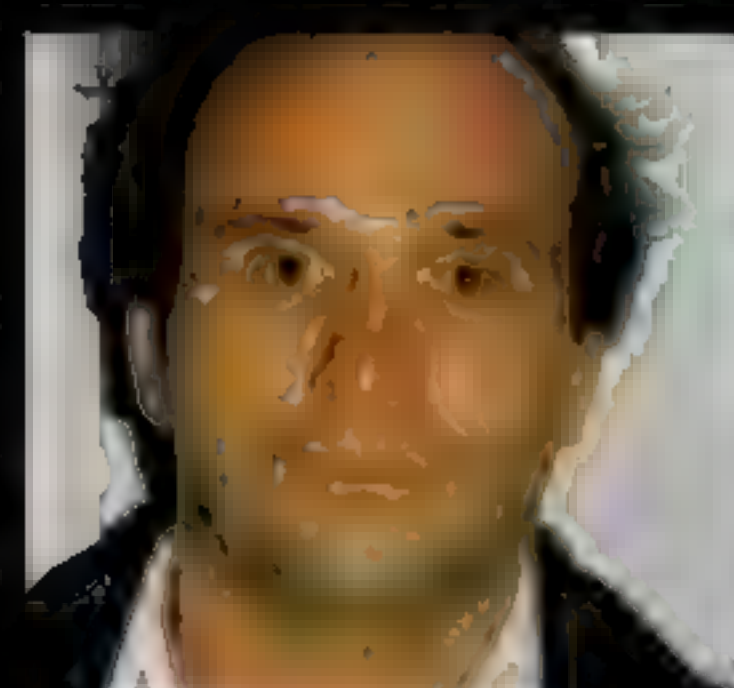
Fidel, Vicente and Carlos were connected to the cartel via Jose 'El Mexicano' Gacha, although they turned against Escobar to form 'Los Pepes'.



### HENRY DE JESÚS PÉREZ DURÁN

NICKNAME: EL MAXIMO

Starting his career as a hitman, El Maximo formed a paramilitary group that provided trafficking route protection.



### JOSÉ RAFAEL ABELLO SILVA

NICKNAME: MONO ABELLO

Abello headed up Medellín's Caribbean interests, pushing cocaine and marijuana out of South and Central America up to its main markets in the USA.



### DASDENNY MUÑOZ MOSQUERA

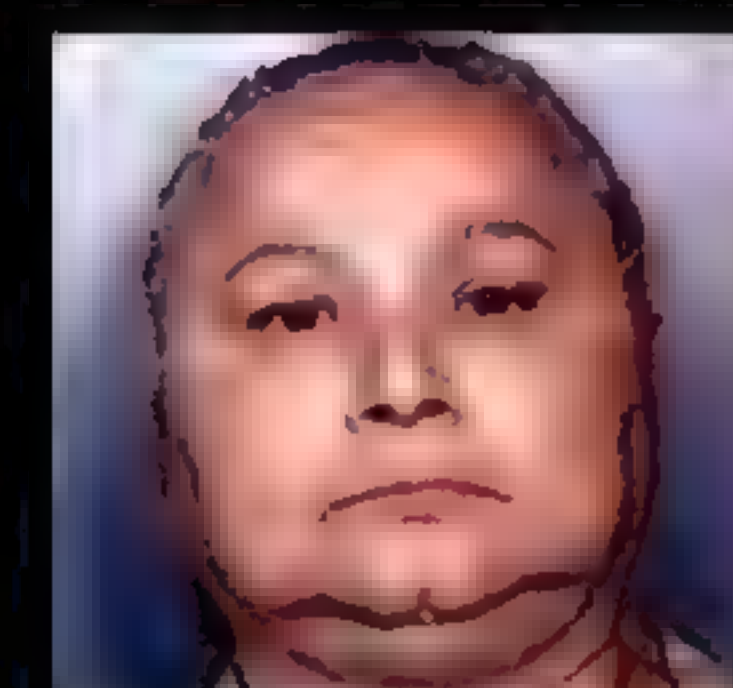
NICKNAME: LA QUICA

A hitman for Medellín, La Quica killed 110 people when he bombed a passenger jet in 1989.



### GEORGE JUNG

Jung was a US citizen and a smuggler who famously flew thousands of kilos of cocaine from Colombia to California for the cartel, and whose story was told in the film *Blow*.



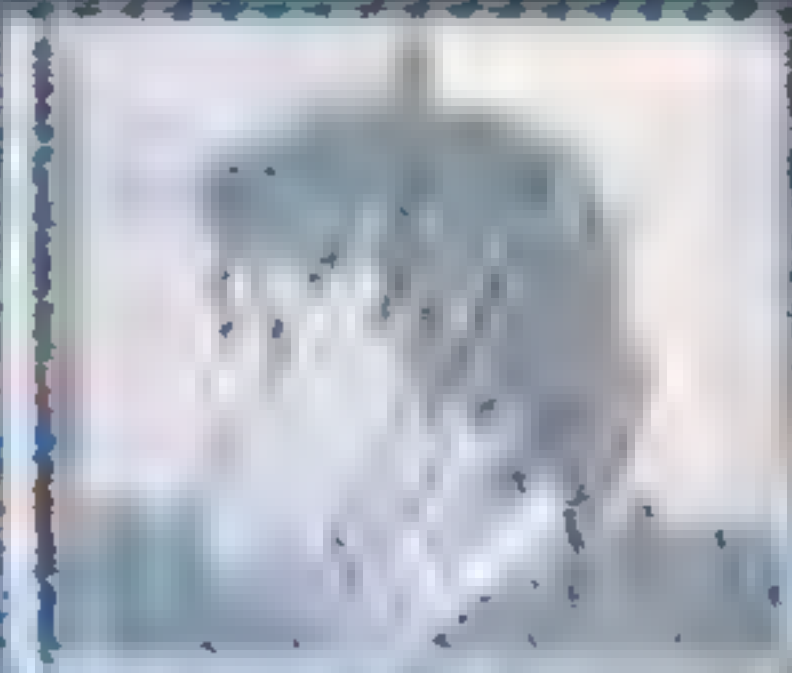
### GRISELDA BLANCO

NICKNAME: LA MADRINA

Also known as the 'Black Widow', Blanco was the murderous Medellín operative behind much of the drug-related violence in Miami in the early 1980s.



SE BUSCAN

PABLO ESCOBAR  
CAYBOLJOSÉ GONZALO  
RODRÍGUEZ GACHA

RECOMPENSA

\$ 100'000.000

A wanted advert airs on Colombian TV for Pablo Escobar and José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha in September 1989



ABOVE Norman's Cay is a Bahamian island with an airstrip used by Carlos Lehder to push cocaine through the Caribbean



JHON JAIR VELÁSQUEZ

NICKNAME: POPEYE

Arguably the most infamous of Medellín's hitmen, Popeye boasted of murdering 257 people himself and arranging 3,000 more as the leader of a team of Escobar's sicarios. He spent some time in the Colombian Navy and police force, before pursuing a criminal career and using his martial training for the cartel's benefit. He was personally responsible for the murders of policemen, journalists and politicians, as well as Escobar's rivals. He also plotted to kill a presidential candidate, a crime for which he received a 22-year jail sentence. To the disgust of many

of his victims' families, his notoriety had bought him enough celebrity upon his release in 2014 that he could pursue a lucrative media career. He published two books, had a YouTube channel with 1.2 million subscribers, directed a film and hosted tours of Escobar's old stomping ground in Medellín. Despite claiming that he was a changed man and asking for forgiveness from his victims' families, he was truly remorseless right up until his death from cancer in February 2020, cursing those who refused him the absolution he sought.

## BLOW BACK

Cocaine use in South America goes way back into the mists of prehistory, even before the time of the Incas, who would chew the leaves of the Andean coca plant to imbibe its stimulating compounds at rituals and feasts, rather like smoking a cigarette after dinner. The active alkaloid in coca leaves wasn't isolated until the mid-19th century by German chemist Friedrich Gaedcke, and for the best part of 50 years after that, its production and international import and export was completely uncontrolled. At the turn of the 20th century, not only could you buy pure cocaine from your local pharmacist, but it was trotted out by doctors with dubious credentials in quack medicines, as 'miracle cures' for everything from the common cold to gout and consumption (tuberculosis). They might not have cured these ailments, but they certainly put paid to the patient's symptoms for a blissful hour or so. Coca-wines laced with the narcotic were sold as 'tonics' and a certain popular soft drink manufacturer set up shop in the US around this time, with a product whose main ingredient ensured this original cola beverage flew off the vendor's stalls. Cocaine's hold on a growing number of addicts and its impact on the health of Western civilisation meant that by the early 1920s, it was illegal for practically anyone to buy, sell, or possess cocaine and cocaine products in most of the developed world. By then, Coca-Cola had long removed cocaine from its recipe.

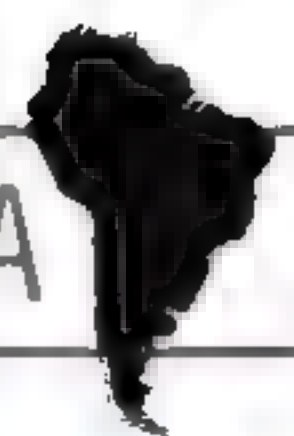
For most of the 20th century until the late 1970s, cocaine wasn't really anyone's recreational drug of choice. The US had its war on alcohol during the 1920s and 1930s and it seemed that, as a nation, it tried to make up for years of drinking time lost to Prohibition for decades after. Drugs were taboo among Mafia crime families in the US and, under Meyer Lansky and Charles 'Lucky' Luciano's newly formed National Crime Syndicate, many mob bosses explicitly outlawed dealing in any narcotics. It brought too much heat on the family, mobsters were to stick to traditional rackets: protection, running numbers, hijacking... whatever. Defy your boss and you'll find yourself wearing concrete shoes at the bottom of the Hudson.

Despite the Mob's misgivings, marijuana became very popular in the 1960s. The authorities largely condoned its use – socialism was the scourge of society at that time, not drugs. Besides, hippies and anarchists are easier to control when they're stoned, so police in parts of the US would often turn a blind eye to pot dealers like soon-to-be Medellín associate George Jung, even though he was transporting tens of thousands of dollars worth of cannabis across the country. In the early 1970s, most cocaine came from southern countries in South America, smuggled into the US alongside the more popular export of marijuana. Cocaine production was a cottage industry largely dominated by Chileans, who took coca paste and leaves, turned it into a more familiar product in laboratories and then used Colombian smugglers to move it further north. It took a bad apple from modest beginnings in the town of Medellín to take this trade from Chile, turn Colombia into the cocaine capital of the world, and America into a nation of powder-snorting, crack-smoking coke fiends.

## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKED

By his early twenties, Pablo Escobar had graduated from forging high school diplomas and selling dodgy cigarettes, to boosting cars, to kidnapping and ransom. A kind of criminal





Members of Search Bloc pose for a picture with Pablo Escobar's body following a shootout on 2 December 1993



**ABOVE** For every cocaine consignment that the US or Colombian authorities intercepted, many more crossed the border into the United States

renaissance man, you might say, he was certainly good at making money from anything bad. He cut his teeth in smuggling under the wing of a stereo smuggler called Alvaro Prieto, but the watershed in Escobar's criminal career didn't come until 1973. That year, General Augusto Pinochet led a violent coup d'état against the socialist Chilean government and overthrew the incumbent president Salvador Allende. Under the subsequent military dictatorship, Chile's cocaine trade was summarily dismantled: labs were destroyed, smuggling routes were shut down by the army and the Chilean traffickers were either shot alongside thousands of dissidents, imprisoned, or forced to flee the country. Some of those refugees went north, in the hope of setting up shop in Colombia where they already had distribution contacts, but a savvy young Escobar had beaten them to the punch. Cocaine was safer and easier to smuggle than the cigarettes, electronics and other contraband he was helping Prieto smuggle. It took up less space, was easier to hide and the profit margins were much higher, so fewer truck loads

**“A KIND OF CRIMINAL RENAISSANCE MAN, YOU MIGHT SAY, HE WAS CERTAINLY GOOD AT MAKING MONEY FROM ANYTHING BAD”**



could be transported for more money. Escobar saw the opportunity that political unrest in Chile had handed him, and he wasn't going to let Chilean traffickers take it back on his home turf. They came and tried their luck but after a few years, Escobar had pushed these rivals out of the Colombian market in a conflagration of violence that would come to characterise the business strategy of the Medellín Cartel.

## BIG FISH SMALL POND

Escobar's first known arrest was on 5 September 1974, for stealing a Renault. Two years later he was busted by Colombia's Department of Administrative Security (or DAS, the equivalent of the FBI) with five others in downtown Medellín in possession of 39 kilos of cocaine, hidden in a spare tyre. Until then, Escobar hadn't really featured on DAS's radar as a player in the cocaine trade. This short, plain and polite crook was considered a mule, nothing more than a petty criminal who did odd jobs for bigger fish. How could he have graduated from stealing cars and shifting a few ounces of coke here and there, to masterminding what would be the biggest drug haul seized in Medellín that year, without anyone noticing? The DAS was about to find out.

Escobar and his gang offered officers \$15,000 to turn them loose, which was refused. If Escobar's growing





**ABOVE** These cocaine laboratories were relatively cheap and simple to set up, and could produce hundreds of kilos of cocaine – millions of dollars worth – before the authorities discovered them

# EVIL KINGPIN OR ROBIN HOOD?

REVERED BY SOME, REILED BY MANY: WHAT DID ESCOBAR DO TO POLARISE COLOMBIA'S OPINION OF HIM?

## THE GOOD

### THE GREAT PHILANTHROPIST

He won the hearts of many of Medellín's poor by building schools, hospitals and housing for the people who lived in the slums. Barrio Pablo Escobar still exists in Medellín today, consisting of 2,800 houses that are home to 13,000.

### SOCCER SPONSOR

Escobar was completely obsessed with 'the beautiful game' and was determined to turn his home town of Medellín into a hotbed of football talent. He built pitches in the slums and donated equipment, floodlights and other resources to local teams.

### A LOVING FATHER

Family meant more to him than money... not the family, his family. Escobar was incredibly protective of his children and while on the run from the Colombian authorities, he once burned \$2 million in cash to keep his daughter warm.

## THE BAD

### HE BOMBED AN AEROPLANE

Escobar's most infamous single act of mass murder was ordering the bombing of Avianca Flight 203 mid-flight, killing 110 people. This commercial aircraft was supposed to be carrying presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo, Escobar's actual target, but he didn't board for security reasons.

### HE MURDERED INNOCENTS

It's no secret that Pablo Escobar pulled no punches when it came to killing his enemies, but in his escalating war against the state he stopped at nothing to make a point. He planted bombs all over Colombia, including one in a Bogotá shopping centre that killed 15 people.

### POLICE ASSASSINATIONS

Anyone who went up against Escobar (which pretty much meant not accepting his bribes) became a target for the cartel. Journalists, judges and lawyers were murdered, and at one point there was an open bounty of around \$600 a head on the police. 550 police officers died as a result at the hands of Medellín hitmen.

### TERRORIST TIES

His indiscriminate bombing campaign and war against the state meant Escobar would have been known for being a Colombian terrorist if his notoriety as an international drug lord hadn't overshadowed it. At the very least, he was connected to the Colombian terrorist organisation FARC, whom he paid to protect his trafficking routes.

reputation in Medellín for offering 'plata o plomo' (silver or lead) hadn't reached the DAS yet, it soon would. Three months after being jailed, Escobar's arrest warrant was mysteriously revoked and he walked free. A couple of months later he was jailed again, then bailed shortly after that. An informant told the judge who was handling the case that they had overheard a phone call in which he was plotting her death and those of the DAS officers who had arrested him. She quickly handed his case over to another judge. The documents relating to his arrest then passed through the hands of no fewer than nine judges, before they simply vanished. It was all very convenient for Escobar, the kind of lucky break that would frequently follow him throughout his criminal career, springing him from tricky legal situations whenever he needed it. A judge would have a change of heart and inexplicably make a decision in his favour, witnesses would have a bout of amnesia, people would disappear, or die, and then Escobar would walk free. In 1981, the officers who arrested Escobar were shot dead in a professional hit in Medellín. Plata o plomo.

## THE AMERICAN CONNECTION

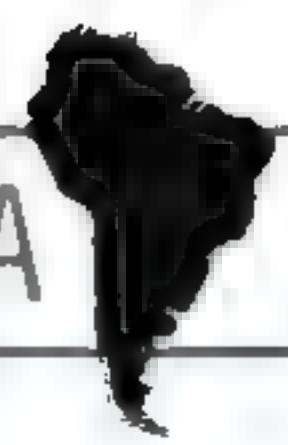
The rumblings of the cartel were being felt on the streets of Medellín in the mid-1970s. Escobar's small

but serious gang of traffickers was called Los Pablos, and they had close business ties with the three Ochoa brothers' El Clan Ochoa. Together, they dominated the cocaine trade in Medellín, the coke capital of Colombia. But only in Colombia were they hot shit – and Escobar had ambitions of cracking the United States, a country and market that him and his associates knew frustratingly little about. The opportunity to expand his burgeoning empire far to the north soon landed in his lap.

The Medellín Cartel owed a lot to a twist of fate that for once, was completely beyond Escobar's bribes and threats. George Jung was an American pot dealer who was already flying thousands of dollars worth of marijuana in a little Cherokee 6 light aircraft, out of Mexico and into the States via a dry lake bed in California. He was busted in Chicago with a car boot full of weed and sent to a low-security prison in Danbury, Connecticut. Here he met his cellmate, Carlos Lehder. Lehder was a Colombian of German extraction doing time for stealing cars, looking to break into America's lucrative cocaine market. The two were polite, even-tempered and articulate, and they hit it off almost immediately. Jung later described their meeting as a "marriage made in heaven, or hell, in the end." Jung had the trafficking infrastructure and a ready market in the States, Lehder was connected to powerful Medellín traffickers who







had a production and distribution network in Colombia. In April 1975, after a year of intense planning in prison, they were released on parole and started putting their plan into action. No one was flying cocaine in private aircraft from Colombia up until that point, it was all smuggled in small quantities in suitcases, or strapped to a mule's body. Jung and Lehder changed that, showing Escobar and his associates that hundreds of kilos of coke could be flown up through the Bahamas, before being smuggled in boats to the East Coast – Miami. Here, the renowned party town for the rich and famous was acquainting itself with the disco era and acquiring an appetite for nose candy, along with the rest of the US. Within days of sending a single plane-load of powder north, millions of dollars in cash came back. Everyone got a hell of a lot richer, very quickly, and for a few golden years, no one really bothered Escobar and his newly formed Medellín drug cartel.

**“EVERYONE GOT A HELL OF A LOT RICHER, VERY QUICKLY, AND FOR A FEW GOLDEN YEARS, NO ONE REALLY BOTHERED ESCOBAR”**

#### BEGINNING OF THE BLOODY END

At the dawn of the 1980s, America was at the peak of the Cold War with Soviet Russia. They were still more concerned with potential communist satellite states popping up in South America than the tonnes of cocaine that was now pouring out into the US. President Reagan changed that. On 14 October 1982, he declared a ‘War on Drugs’ that effectively doubled-down on an initiative that had begun with President Nixon ten years previously. Focus switched from stopping cocaine at US borders, to establishing a US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) presence in Colombia, who worked with the authorities there to put an end to the production and export of cocaine at its source. Cue DEA agents Stephen Murphy and Javier Peña, who were key figures in taking down Pablo Escobar, made famous by Netflix’s popular *Narcos* series.

About the same time that the US and Colombia began to tighten its pincer around the Medellín Cartel, Escobar was using his now-immense wealth to fund paramilitary organisations. In return, the heavily armed and trained soldiers of Muerte a Secuestradores (‘Death to Kidnappers’ – MAS) would protect the cartel’s drug routes and its





**ABOVE** Escobar's Hacienda Nápoles included this 1930s Cadillac that he peppered with bullet holes to make it look like an authentic, Prohibition-era gangster's automobile



Jorge Luis Ochoa was one of the key members of the Medellín Cartel along with his brothers Juan David and Fabio

members. MAS also did a lot of Escobar's dirty work: death squads were sent to kill anyone who defied the cartel and couldn't be bought by Escobar. Between the cartel's own cold-blooded sicarios (hitmen) and Escobar's paramilitary muscle, Medellín's murder rate soared from a low of less than 50 murders per 100,000 people in the 1970s, to nearly 400 murders per 100,000 in the early 1990s. *Forbes* might have named Escobar the seventh richest man on the planet in 1989 but his wealth came at a huge cost, with *Time* magazine naming Medellín "the most dangerous city on Earth" in 1993.

Greed and a thirst for power got to Escobar in the end. His own far-fetched ambition to become president had been extinguished in 1982, when he was pushed out of his seat in the Chamber of Representatives of Colombia by opposition from journalist and future presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán. Escobar held this grudge against him for years, and when Galán returned to politics in 1989 and strove for Escobar's extradition to the US – something he feared above everything – Escobar had him shot by hitmen at one of Galán's campaign rallies on 18 August 1989. Two months later, Escobar blew up a commercial passenger jet in a failed attempt to kill Galán's successor. César Gaviria went on to become president in 1990, setting his crosshairs on Escobar. Colombians were tired of the cartel and the price it was extracting from them. Many were willing to risk plomo in order to tear this cancer out of their society.

## ON THE RUN

The Medellín Cartel's campaign of terror in the late 1980s and early 1990s were the acts of a desperate and black-hearted man. Blowing up Avianca Flight 203 and killing 110 innocent people for the sake of removing a single enemy was a new low for Escobar; anything he did after that couldn't make him look more evil than he had become. He then tried to send a message to Gaviria, warning him to cease his implementation of an extradition treaty with the US, in the only way a narco-terrorist knows: by bombing government buildings and assassinating officials, murdering dozens more civilians in the process. The Colombian government got the message though and eventually offered Escobar a deal.

In 1991 he surrendered to the authorities and went to prison for five years. In return, Colombia would not extradite him. It was a good deal for Escobar considering the heinous crimes he was guilty of, made sweeter by the fact he was going to do his time in La Catedral, a prison on the edges of Medellín built to Escobar's own specifications. Of course, it resembled a palace more than a prison with just one inmate, replete with its own swimming pool, bar, jacuzzi and a football pitch. Escobar chose his own guards, Medellín men still loyal to him, and the fortifications were designed to keep a growing number of his enemies out, rather than to keep him in.

The story might have ended this way without any sense of rough justice if Escobar had quietly done his time. But the cartel's operations continued with an increasingly paranoid Escobar calling the shots from inside his gilded cage, fearing for the safety of his young family in Medellín, and eventually torturing and murdering four of his own men he accused of being traitors. This was the final straw for the Colombian government. They ordered Escobar to be transferred to a high-security prison and in July 1992, sent the Colombian army in to fetch him. Escobar escaped this time, but effectively signed his own death warrant. Too many powerful people on both sides of the law had had enough. Just 16 months later, the former king of cocaine was put in a body bag along with Jhon "Limón" Burgos, the only member of the Medellín Cartel that remained loyal to Escobar to his last breath. For most of Colombia, this was a good day.

## ESCOBAR'S LEGACY

### NOT EVEN HIS SON HONOURS THE MEMORY OF THE COCAINE KING

In an interview with *El País*, Sebastián Marroquín (who changed his name from Juan Pablo Escobar) describes the *Narcos* series as being "full of errors", that his father was "much crueler than he appears in the show." He talks about how Escobar would boast when news of one of his bombs appeared on TV, and how his family travelled with blindfolds on because "my father always said, if we were captured and tortured, we couldn't give him up." In reality Escobar's family lived in awful conditions when they were on the run, surrounded by heaps of money but with no food. "It doesn't show the moments of loneliness, fear, anxiety and terror," said Marroquín, "the violence was far worse than the show suggests."







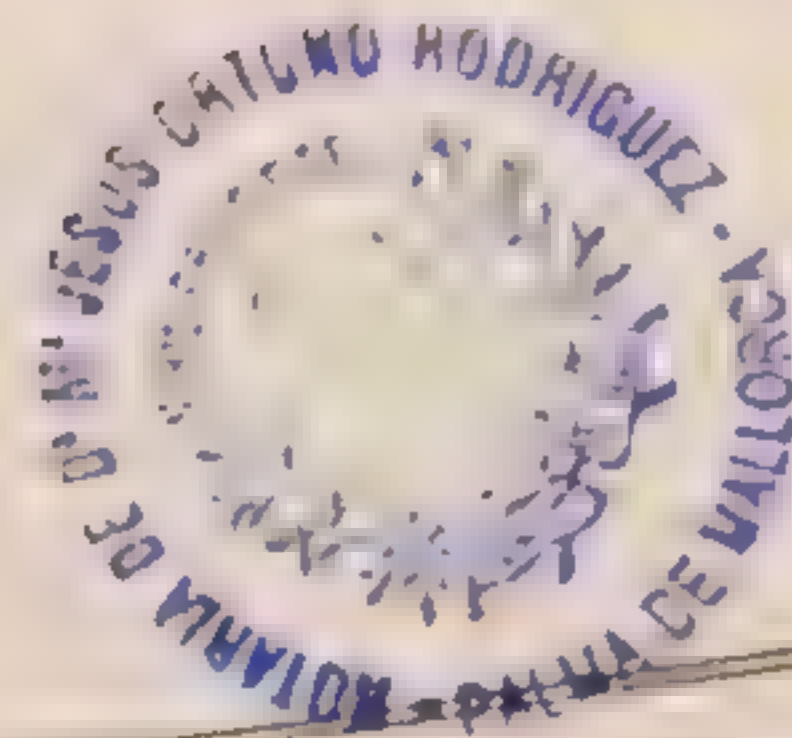
Pat Witcomb (right) stops off with his four-man security team on the way across Colombia



Pat and his adoptive son in London, 1977, taken two years before he got out of the business in Colombia



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POR  
PATRICK PHILLIP WITCOMB y otra .

JORGE MENDOZA PLAZAS  
Notario Tercero

Roberto Sendoya Escobar's adoption papers, dated 7 December 1965, several months after that fateful raid in Bogotá





Phillip Witcomb stands with his driver (left) and bodyguard (right), next to one of the armoured cars that took him to school (and picked up cartel cash)

# SON OF THE COCAINE KING

SERIAL MURDER, ATTEMPTED KIDNAPPINGS AND MONEY LAUNDERING ON AN INDUSTRIAL SCALE: ESCOBAR'S ELDEST CHILD EXPLAINS WHAT IT'S BEEN LIKE TO LIVE IN THE SHADOW OF THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS DRUG TRAFFICKER

WORDS BEN BIGGS

**P**hillip Witcomb, born Roberto Sendoya Escobar, had an inkling of what his biological heritage really was throughout his childhood, but it wasn't until he was in his twenties that his adoptive father told him the full truth. In 1965 he had been rescued as an infant from a bloody shootout in Bogotá, Colombia, between Colombian special forces and a group of criminals connected to Phillip's biological father: a teenage bank robber and thief who would go on to become the world's most notorious narcoterrorist, Pablo Escobar. Pat Witcomb was a British intelligence agent working for MI6 who was infiltrating the organised

crime gangs of Colombia under the cover of being General Manager for De La Rue, the firm responsible for printing Colombian banknotes. He took Escobar's abandoned child from his dying mother at the scene, adopting him shortly after. As Pablo Escobar's power and influence grew, he came to learn of his estranged son and whose custody he was in, and numerous failed attempts were made to bring young Phillip back to his biological father's side, which always ended in bloodshed.

To say that Phillip's life has been remarkable is an understatement. Today he lives in Mallorca with his wife, has forged a successful career in fine art and recently had an autobiography of his own incredible story published. By his own admission, out of all of Pablo Escobar's children, he looks the most like his biological father and shares many of the same personality traits. But to his credit, throughout his life he has steered clear of the same trouble that befell Escobar, helped in no small measure by the values and moral compass instilled by his adoptive



**LEFT** Phillip (Roberto Sendoya Escobar) today, leading a distinctly less dramatic life than he did as a child







A formidable security team was assigned to both the De La Rue armoured transport and Pat Witcomb's family home



Escobar with his wife Maria Victoria Henao, mother to Phillip's half-siblings, in 1983

father and family. He's affable, effusive and speaks with a southern English accent that belies his Colombian heritage.

## How close to the truth of Pablo Escobar's life have the various TV shows and films been?

One of the issues with the whole *Narcos* thing is that people have generally taken what they've produced as read. I think they forget that it's a dramatisation. They've dramatised scenes like from when they're crossing the border into Panama, but there aren't a lot of facts to back it up. What hasn't been described, what people don't know, is how it all started. *Narcos* started with, "Well, there's this drug lord, right?" And nobody knows how a school dropout thug, a street urchin, becomes a billionaire.

He doesn't do it because he's a very good drug lord, he does it because he's had an incredible amount of help from the British and American secret services. He started as a kid like many inner-city kids in the first-world, dropping out of school and going around mugging people to get some money. But how does he

get from there to the situation in 1976 when he's doing well? And if he's doing well, so what? He's got \$500-\$600 million... That's not billionaire-land. How does he get from there to there? That's what this story is about.

## In your book, you switch perspectives between your adoptive father's work as a secret agent, and you as a child.

Yes. It's not just the story of a kid growing up with all these really interesting people – I've taken the trouble to hint at certain people around us, who they worked for and what they represented and [the reader] has to see the bigger picture. The book is a walk through a legal minefield without setting off any mines. There is a much bigger game out there and Don Pablo was just a pawn in this game. There are much bigger players.

## How big do you think Escobar would have become without help?

If I had to guess? Well, you can imagine how difficult it is to make a profit of \$500 million out of transporting cocaine paste. There's this whole army of people you have to pay, right? And there's a [saying] in Colombia: "There's no such thing as loyalty, you have to buy it." Loyalty is bought and in the drug business it's even more prevalent. You can't get someone to work for you, even your brother, without paying them... it's complicated. If you're in Hong Kong, you pay a lorry driver Hong Kong dollars. The lorry driver's got to feed his family, gives his wife some money, she goes to the supermarket but they're not going to accept Hong Kong dollars in the Carulla [a Colombian supermarket chain] in Bogotá.



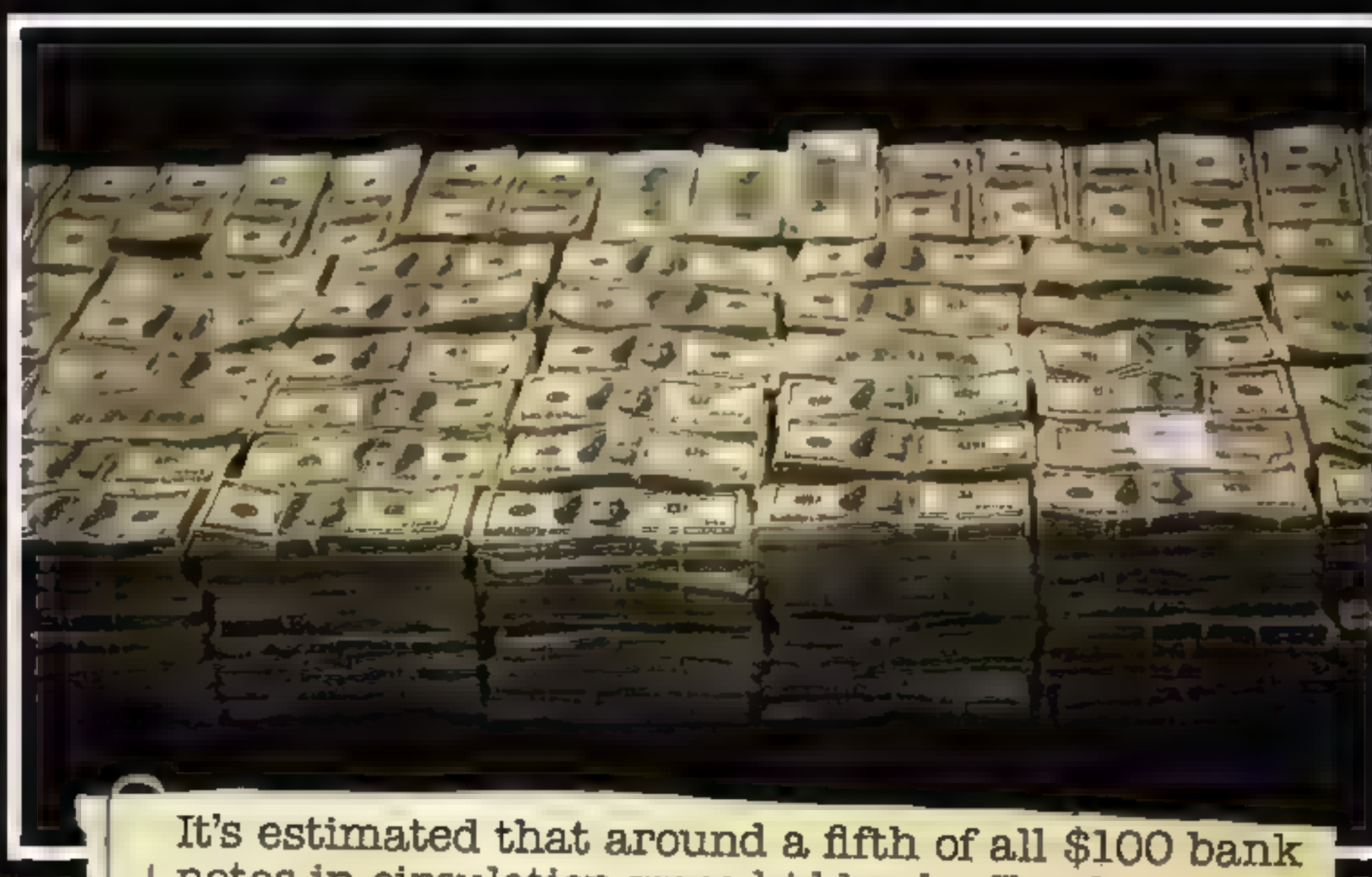
Phillip Witcomb in his boarding school blazer: he had a reputation as a bit of a rogue at school



## ESCOBAR'S MISSING MILLIONS

AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH, PABLO ESCOBAR HAD AMASSED A \$30 BILLION FORTUNE. SOME WAS APPROPRIATED BY THE AUTHORITIES, BUT MUCH MORE IS STILL STASHED IN VAULTS AND BANK ACCOUNTS AROUND THE WORLD...

Before he was shot dead, the increasingly paranoid and distrustful boss of the Medellín Cartel had the few henchmen who knew the secret locations of his enormous fortune killed. But one man who had direct access to Medellín funds for a time, including a private account for Escobar containing a skim of the cartel's profits, was MI6 agent Pat Witcomb. Long after Phillip and the Witcomb family had left Colombia, around the time of Escobar's downfall, Pat brought his adopted son to a hidden lockup in Madrid. Inside were a number black sacks and holdalls containing millions of dollars in cash. It was just a fraction of the money that the agency had taken from Escobar and that Pat was now in the process of depositing into private bank accounts or converting into gold and storing in vaults. Pat had a record of the places he'd put some of this fortune that he'd encrypted in his diary, but knowledge of the location and how to access the money died with him. Phillip talks in detail about the possibility of finding Escobar's money and even the code in his adoptive father's diary, despite the danger that tracking down this cash presents even today, nearly 30 years after Escobar's death and the fall of the Medellín Cartel.



It's estimated that around a fifth of all \$100 bank notes in circulation were hidden by Escobar in Colombia around the time he was shot

with those thugs they're just [Phillip mimics a machine-gun spraying bullets]. There's a totally different ethos and professionalism about ex-special forces people – and dad effectively had his own private army of ex-special forces. I also know that he had help from SAS people. Since writing the book, I was contacted by someone whose father was out there with my dad.

**And he knew that bringing you to meet Escobar would aggravate him?**

That was the point of it. It was rubbing it in and saying, "I'm in charge." What he was saying was that 'foreign powers have come here and we're in charge of this

Pat stands with his adoptive son outside Lucton School in Herefordshire. The fees for this private school were paid for by "the firm"

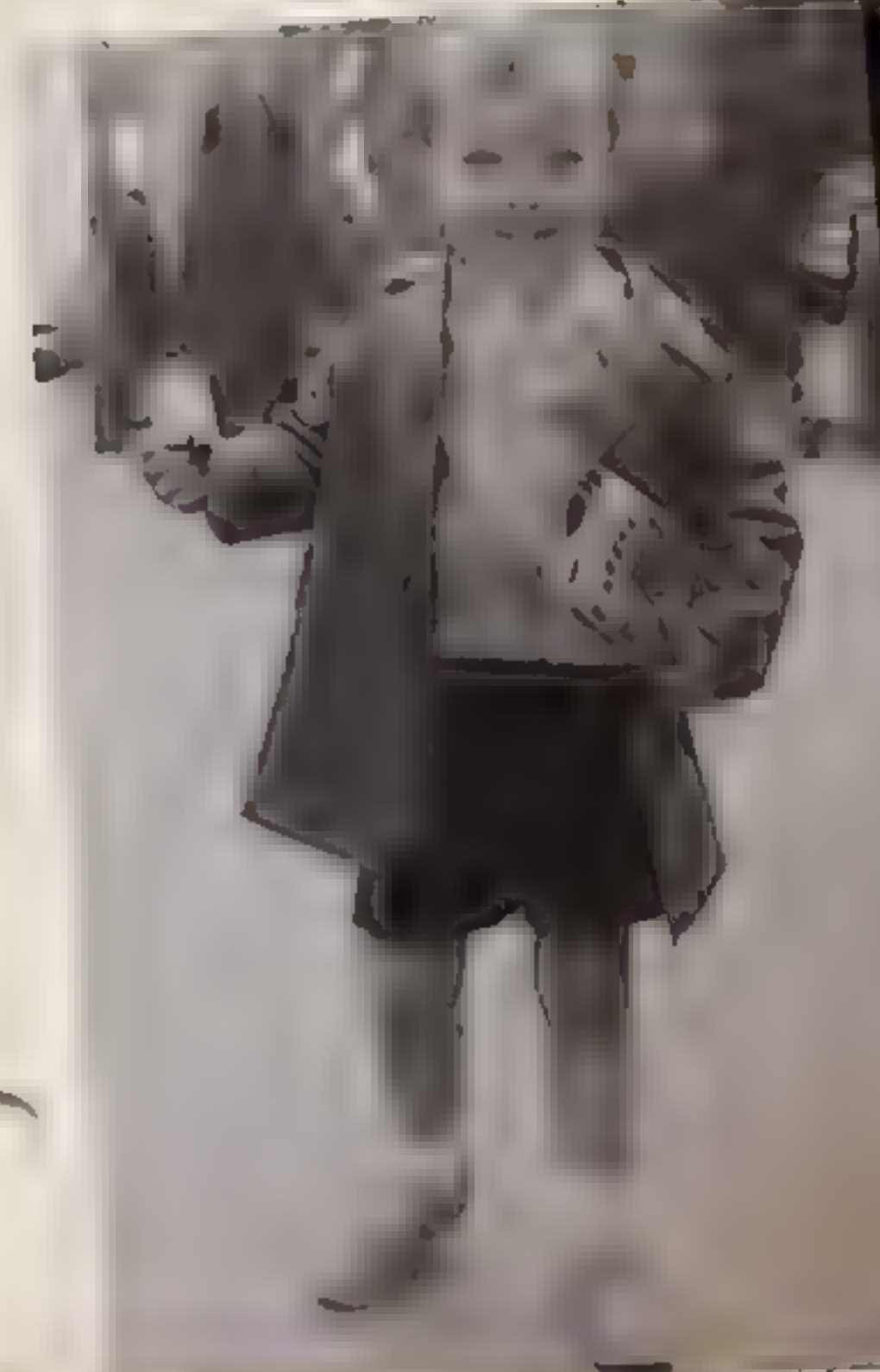
When you're talking about hundreds of millions of dollars in notes, coming into the fincas [a farm used as a cover by Escobar to store money], what the hell do you do with this stuff? You can't just say, "Right, everybody in Colombia, you're all being paid in dollars now." The realistic thing is that [Pablo] has got a massive problem. He's been made into a king by the powers that be so that they've got just one tyrant to deal with rather than 500. Which is what they did in Libya, Iraq and all around the world. It's what the secret services do for their country. He's got this army of thugs, people who go around killing for him, people who do the deals, people who are transporting drugs... but his income is dollars! So in answer to your question, he wouldn't have made as much as you think. He can't just walk into the Bank of Bogotá and say "I'd like to change \$200 million," they'd just nick him, even in those days. So he's got to change the money into Colombian pesos. And there's only one company that can change that amount of money... To make billions you've got to have help. Proper, organised help.

I used to talk to dad [Pat Witcomb] about it: "So, all these transport routes are manifested, they've got to report in on the radio and stuff. How did you sneak in the dodgy money?" And the only armoured car that wasn't on the manifest at 9.30am was the one that took me to school. So [in the book] I describe one of these scenes where they're picking up the money. That's why I know these things. It was safer to have me there with his armed security than playing at home with my Lego and getting kidnapped. There's a lot of pride in the Latin countries – it wasn't the fact that he really wanted his first-born son, it was because some bastard was holding him to ransom. That hurt Don Pablo's pride.

**Do you think your adoptive father fully appreciated the risk of involving you in his business?**

Yes, that's why he had everyone around him armed to the bloody teeth! The difference between my dad's people and Don Pablo's thugs, who were paid \$200 a day to go around shooting people – they come out of the shanty towns, he gives them guns and they do what they can – the difference between those people and the people my dad had around him was that my dad's people were the equivalent of Royal Marine Commandos. And with these people it's one shot, through the brain. Whereas

**“DAD EFFECTIVELY HAD HIS OWN PRIVATE ARMY OF EX-SPECIAL FORCES”**



Phillip Witcomb outside a shopping centre in Bogotá, 1968. On one of these shopping trips, someone tried to abduct Phillip for Pablo Escobar







Princess Anne makes a visit to Colombia in 1973. In the background on the left, Pat Witcomb's boss in Colombia, De La Rue chairman Sir Arthur Norman, can be seen

company. There's nothing you can do about it, what are you going to do? We're telling you who's boss.' But of course, that's the classic mistake that all these first-world countries make when they go into these bedouin-type operations to make these thugs: the thugs get too big for them. They become the biggest bully in the playground. Then what happens? Send the Americans in! Like in Baghdad... and they flatten the place. It keeps happening. "That Gaddafi fella's out of control, send them in!"

## The attempts that Escobar made to abduct you always resulted in violence and bloodshed. How has that affected you?

You can't say that seeing violence so close as a child hasn't affected you. I think about it today as if it happened this morning. It's very clear in my mind and the older I get, the clearer it gets. You start to get senility and you actually remember your childhood better than what you did last week. In the same way that my security describes his mental health problems quite openly, I'm happy to talk about that. I suffered terrible, terrible mental health problems after 1993. I voluntarily went to mental hospital. I just couldn't deal with life, my brain closed down and I had some very serious problems. But I got out of it... You cannot go through life in the world we live in today - which is a dreadful place really - get to 55 and not have had some kind of depression. We all go through problems when our mums die or when our dads die... Or you're walking down the road and you see someone hit by a car. We all have some kind of tragic experience, and it affects us for the rest of our lives.

## You're an artist now.

Yes - that's my mental health aid. And I beat the crap out of my drums and I feel a lot better. Then I get back to my painting, which is very controlled. I used to sleepwalk when I was in Bogotá and when I woke up, there were portraits of Leonardo da Vinci on the walls... Just like that! I thought I was going to get six of the best for this. I was always inclined to drawing. My half-brother [Juan Sebastián Marroquín Santos] and I do not get on, we don't talk to each other but it's funny that two guys who grew up in separate parts of the world with the same father both end up drawing for a living - he's an architect. There must have been something in Don Pablo that was artistic, I don't know what though!

**You had a recurring dream about a girl in a red dress. Do you think that, subconsciously, you knew this was your biological mother?**

I still have that dream occasionally. These are called flashbacks in the psychology world, apparently. I know it's an actual memory, imprinted in my mind, but I don't understand it. So I'm seeking an explanation, but you don't know what to say as a child. So I have this dream, wake up in a sweat and I'm scared. Eventually I get the answers. It turns out that the red isn't a red dress. If you get a recurring flashback dream, to get an explanation for it is fortunate. And when things are explained, even though they are dreadful and you now know how someone died, it draws a line. You understand it.

## "I VOLUNTARILY WENT TO A MENTAL HOSPITAL. I JUST COULDN'T DEAL WITH LIFE, MY BRAIN CLOSED DOWN"

**There's a nice moment in your childhood when you're stealing cookies in the kitchen and your adoptive dad comes in to sneak some chocolate away, and he says this behaviour must be 'in your blood'.**

Well we're both scared of mother. You've got an MI6 secret agent, licensed to kill, and he's scared of his wife! She was a bit of a dragon - the two of us had a bit of a thing there, naughty boys together. So I've got it in my blood and I'm always fighting this, every day. I don't know about Manuela, my half-sister - she wasn't treated very well either. But the other side of the family have all got into trouble. Uncle Roberto has been to prison, the Gaviria boys are dead. All the lads have all got themselves into trouble, dead or been to prison.

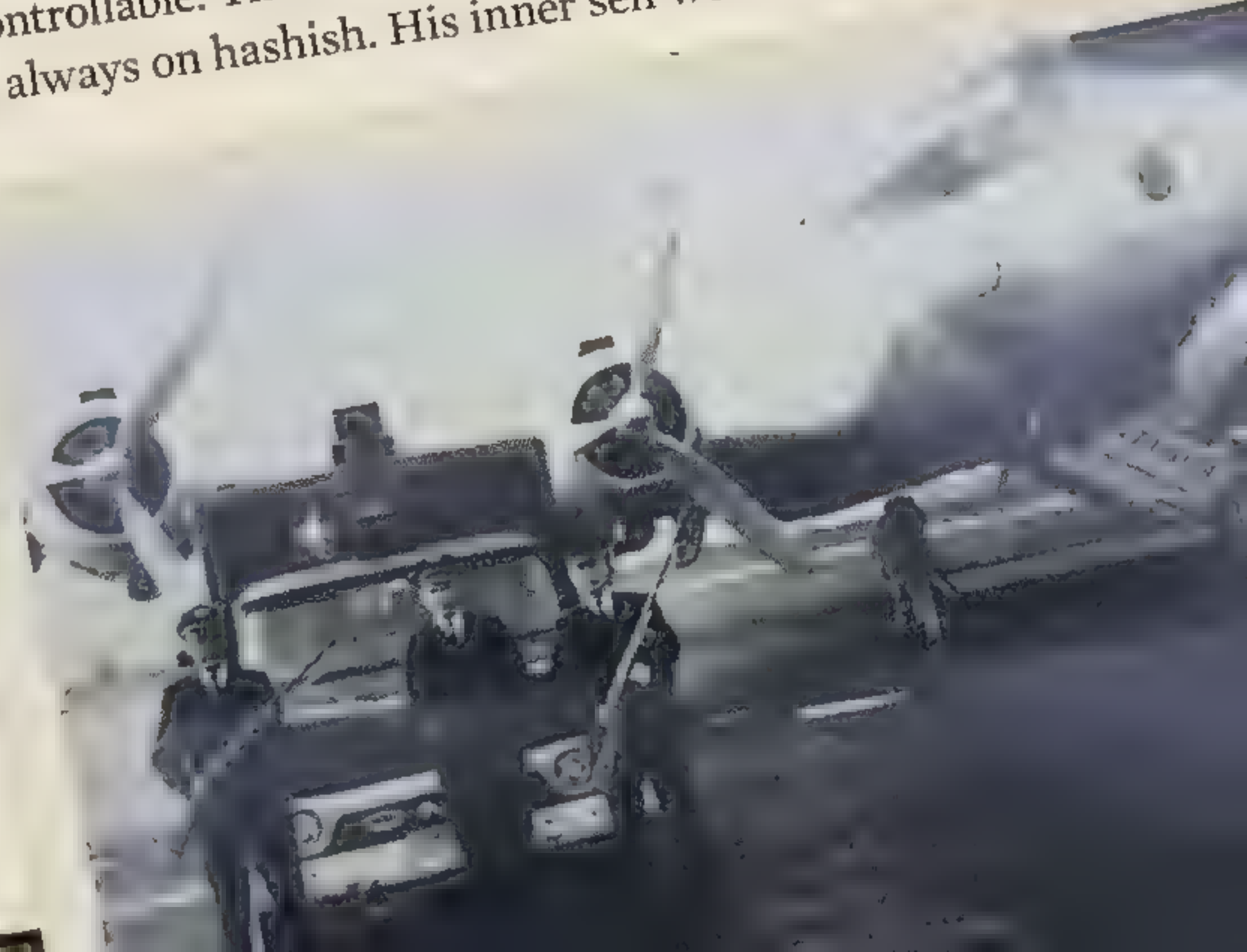
So I've made it quite clear that I am not that; I am the difference. I'm the guy that looks like Don Pablo and is probably most like him, and yet nature or nurture has taken that course from me and I am totally the opposite to what he and his cronies were. I'm anti anything like that and deliberately stay away from it all. But everyday I fight the urge to... you know, "Bloody tourists driving the wrong way, drag 'em out of the car and..." , fighting this inner self all the time, and I've been fighting that all my life. I've got old school reports that say: "Phillip Witcomb must learn to control his temper." If a prefect in school came up to me I'd just punch them in the face, kick them in the groin and walk off. There's all this fighting and the tendency to want to deal with things in the way that my real father did. I don't, but I don't have a problem in admitting that I'm always fighting it. I don't drink, because once you've had a drink it becomes uncontrollable. That was half Don Pablo's problem, he was always on hashish. His inner self would come out,



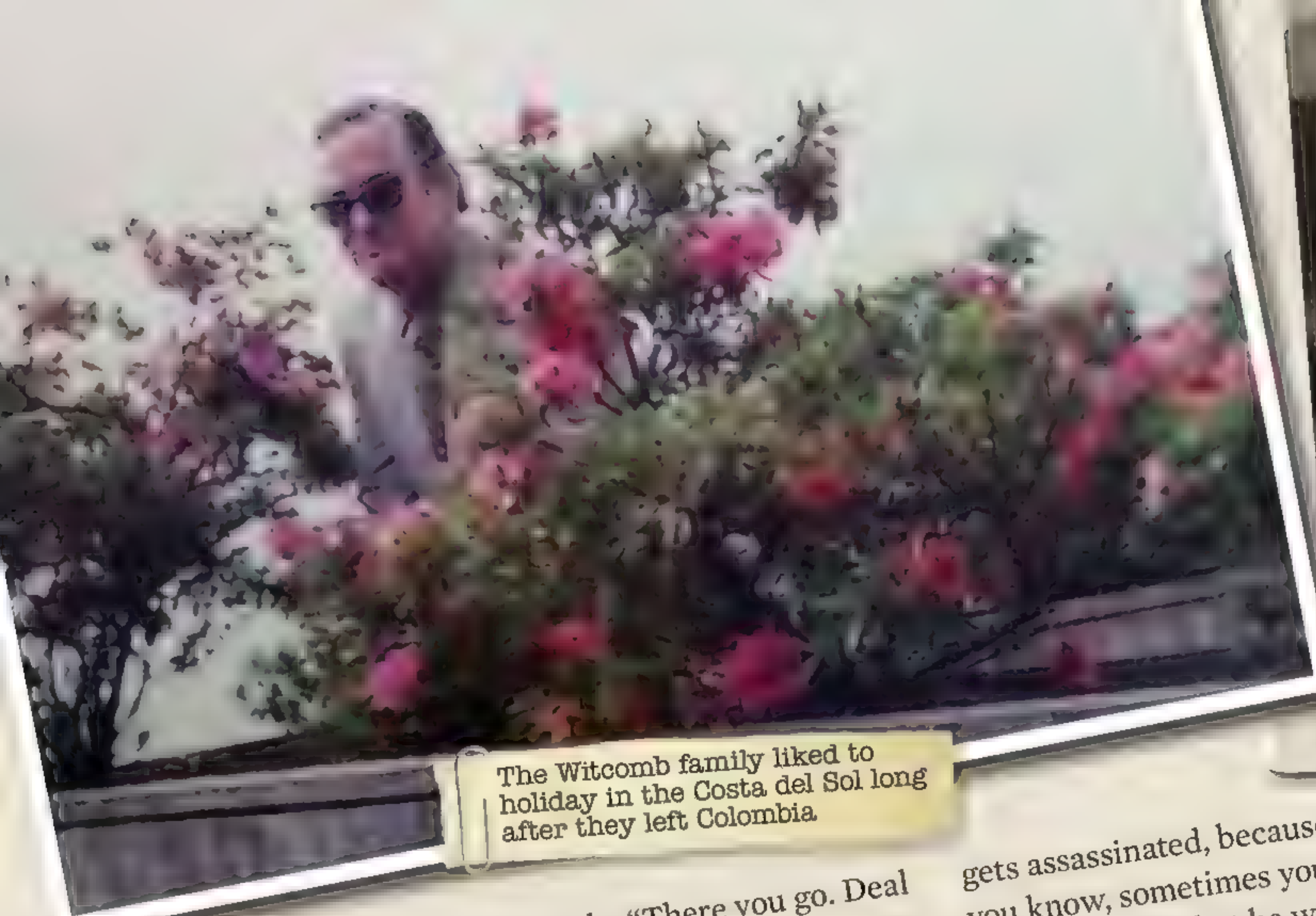
Phillip, next to the phone box he would call his parents from, outside his boarding school in Herefordshire



Joan and Pat Witcomb with their adopted son







The Witcomb family liked to holiday in the Costa del Sol long after they left Colombia.

he'd pull a gun out and shoot people: "There you go. Deal with that." Whereas if you're sober you are able to reason with what the law allows – although he thought he was above the law. I'm not proud that this guy is related to me.

### Your story could easily be the subject of a documentary or movie.

That book is written with the view of having it made into a film. If you can imagine that Ian Fleming used Sir Arthur Norman [chairman of De La Rue] from the old days. Now, when I sat in Sir Arthur Norman's office, I understand where Fleming got those opening scenes for *Doctor No* from, where he walks in and throws the hat on the hat stand from. There's a real-life version of that, which was actually in Regent Street. So the Ian Fleming stories are fictional, but this is the real-life version of that. When my dad says to me, "Well son, your education has cost a fortune," in the book, I don't write about the whole conversation, but we did have a discussion as to who was actually paying all the bills. And he said, "The firm paid for all your education, the bills, the air fares; everything about you and your life was paid for by the firm." Later on I asked him who 'the firm' was and I expected him to say, of course, De La Rue, but he didn't. Sometimes what people don't say is more important than what they say.

You know when you see these Tomahawk cruise missiles fly down the street and... Everyone's seen that: "And it's gone left at the bank, wow." Where do you think they get that information to feed into these weapons? So dad has a tiny little camera he used to film that with, and he used to get me and Monique to walk past banks and official buildings, pretending to do holiday snaps. We never saw those films. This information-gathering is a big part of the spy business.

### Towards the end of your book you talk about a code your adoptive dad gave you, which could be a link to an enormous stash of Escobar's cash.

The way I've described it is the way it happened. He's given me his diary and his diary has notes in it, stuff in it about the money. Then a bit of paper falls out onto the bed – and it's a Home Office document. And there's this stuff on the back but the poor bloke dies before he can tell me. I got the impression he wanted to tell me stuff about it and he's written that down in case he croaks or

gets assassinated, because he's in that business where, you know, sometimes you die. But I've had a long time to study his life, what he was doing and everything about what he is and his character points in a very different direction to what people think. We're talking about the banking system, deposit boxes, things being converted from cash into other things. Dad was a clever man... My real father was not the biggest brain in the world. He'd just put money in the wall and get some nummy to put cement over it and, you know, "They won't find that." But I'm probably the only person alive today who's seen the real Escobar's missing millions. And there will be banking organisations today that have numbered accounts that they don't know where the money's from. I'm telling you now, you're not looking for those bags of cash that I saw in Madrid.

### So Escobar's millions aren't in Madrid?

No, no. That's the last time I saw some of it. The amount in value at the time was about \$210 million. That was the bits left in cash. So it's a lot more than that and because I know [Pat] would have converted that cash into other stuff, you're looking for different types of commodities and things. I've got a pretty good idea of where some of it is, I'm just not sure I've got the balls to go and find it! But I do have plans, and I would like to conclude successfully the meetings I'm having now with various people to do a documentary series, take a book like Portillo does on his railway journeys and resolve this issue for good.

ROBERTO SENDOYA ESCOBAR

## SON OF ESCOBAR FIRST BORN

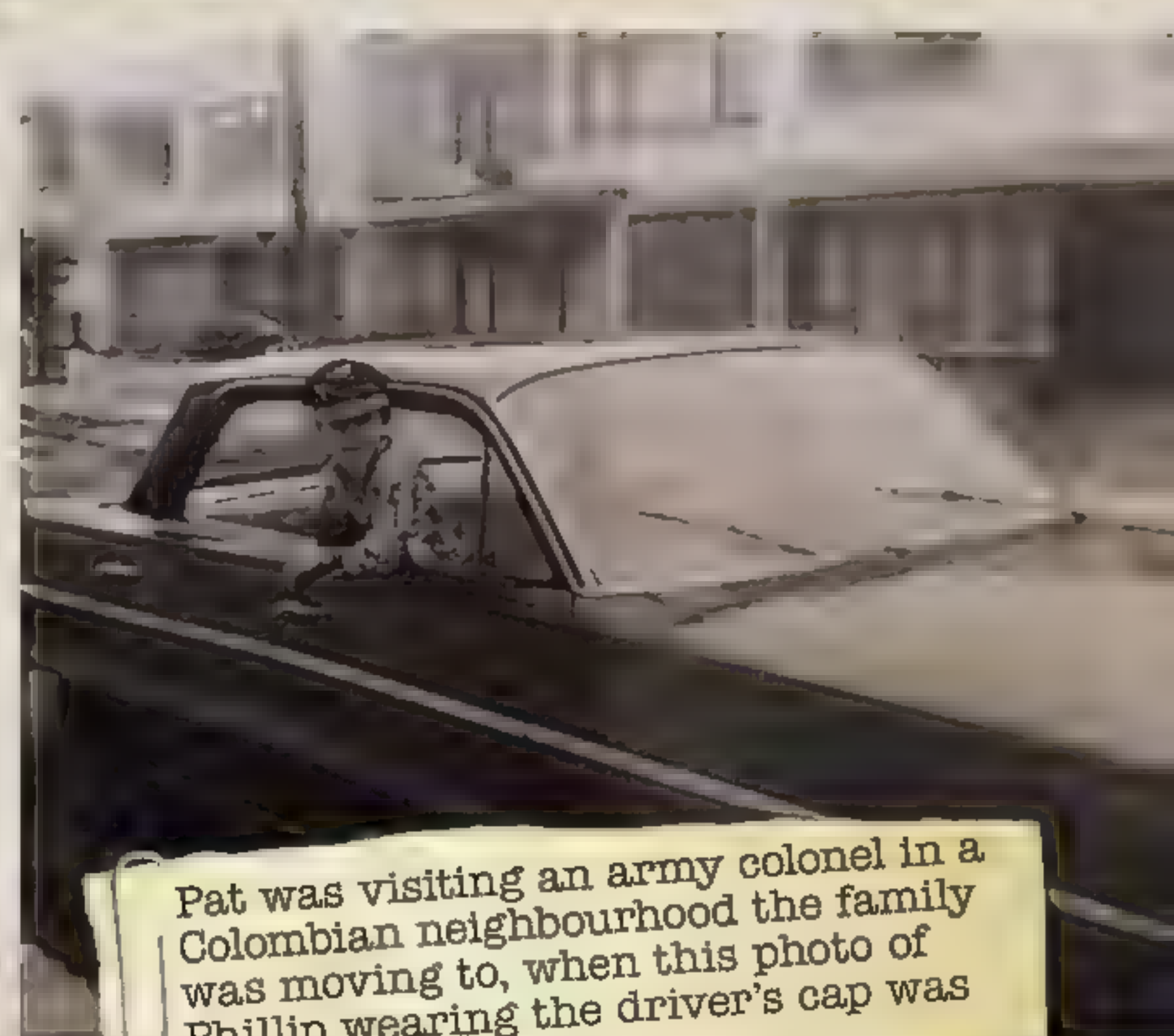
The murders, the hidden millions and M16's secret  
The real truth about my father

*Son of Escobar* (Ad Lib Publishers) by Roberto Sendoya Escobar, the incredible story of Pablo Escobar's first child, is available now from Amazon and all good bookstores.

Phillip's biological father, pictured in Medellin at the height of his power, in the late 1980s



Pat was visiting an army colonel in a Colombian neighbourhood the family was moving to, when this photo of Phillip wearing the driver's cap was taken by his guards









# HOW THE BLACK WIDOW BECAME THE GODMOTHER OF COCAINE

IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, GRISELDA BLANCO WAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE MEDELLÍN CARTEL'S MOVE INTO THE U.S.'S BURGEONING COCAINE MARKET

WORDS SETH FERRANTI

**H**eroin was the drug that initially dominated the headlines in the 1970s. It devastated communities, especially the inner-cities. Cocaine hit the scene under very different circumstances. It was a party drug, used primarily by the Wall Street jet-setters and discotheque crowd. In the 1970s cocaine was an exotic, champagne drug that gave people an aura of cool, and all the hip and trendy people were getting into it.

"It didn't hold the negative stigma attached to drugs like heroin, and was often done openly within the party circuit, early on," says Kevin Chiles, the author of *The Crack Era*, in *Real Crime* magazine. "However, America's appetite for illicit drugs ultimately dictated the supply and evolution of the Colombian cocoa farmer into fully fledged drug cartels." And, in a break from the norm, a woman would lead the cocaine invasion for the South Americans.

"Griselda Blanco had a tough childhood," says Niko Vorobyov, the author of *Dopeworld*. "She was into prostitution and petty crime since she was a kid. That made her one tough, ruthless bitch."

Blanco came up on the streets of Medellín as a thief and hustler, eventually transitioning to the drug trade. She was not against killing her adversaries, which earned her major kudos in a world dominated by brash and violent men.



“Blanco’s rise to narco infamy began with an abusive childhood that eventually took her to the streets, moving from prostitution to extortion and other crimes,” Christian Cipollini, the author of *Murder Inc.*, observes. “The drug business endeavour really kickstarted when she met her second husband, Alberto Bravo. He was already involved in the drug trade and the pair fully exploited the business after they illegally moved to New York in the 1970s.” Together, the drug dealing duo quickly built up a sizeable marijuana and cocaine distribution business, headquartered in Queens, NY.

“Blanco’s femininity was a fascinating counterpoint to the macho, gun-toting stereotypes associated with drug lords, but it was her innovative thinking that changed the game,” says Pascal Hughes, who hosts the *Real Narcos* podcast. “She revolutionised drug-smuggling methods, using a network of female drug mules to flirt and beguile their way through US customs with contraband stashed on their persons, in special-made brassieres and girdles.” However, in 1975, Blanco and Bravo were part of the first major federal indictment for cocaine distribution in the US.

“They fled back to Colombia before they could be arrested,” explains Tiffany Chiles, the editor/founder of *Don Diva* magazine. “That same year the marriage and partnership came to a dramatic end when a gun battle between the two left Griselda with a gunshot wound to the

**“BLANCO WAS INCREDIBLY VIOLENT AND CRUEL, EVEN BY INDUSTRY STANDARDS. HER VICIOUSNESS, HER SADISM, BEG THE QUESTION: WHAT MADE HER LIKE THAT?”**

stomach and Alberto dead.” Blanco, who assumed the nom de guerre Black Widow, quickly returned to the States with a new base of operations in Miami and resumed her duties as a trusted member of the Medellín Cartel.

Ron Chepesiuk, the author of *Queenpins*, says, “Griselda was one of the early pioneers of drug traffickers. Being a woman, I think, was to her advantage, especially in the early stage of her criminal career.”

It’s alleged she had a close relationship with Pablo Escobar, but Blanco’s ruthlessness separated her not only from other women, but from most men. Alongside her use of charm and seduction, Blanco was completely brutal.

“She was incredibly violent and cruel, even by the standards of her industry,” says Hughes in a *Real Crime* article. “She had a chequered past and a grim upbringing. But even so, her viciousness, her sadism, beg the question: what makes a person like that?”

Pablo Escobar may have been the world-famous supervillain and narco-terrorist, but Griselda Blanco was actually one of the founding members of the Medellín Cartel. The trailblazer oversaw some of the first distribution routes in North America for the cocaine exporters – “First from New York in the 1970s when the cartel was pushing marijuana, and then in Miami in the 1980s when the cartel’s product turned to cocaine,” says Scott



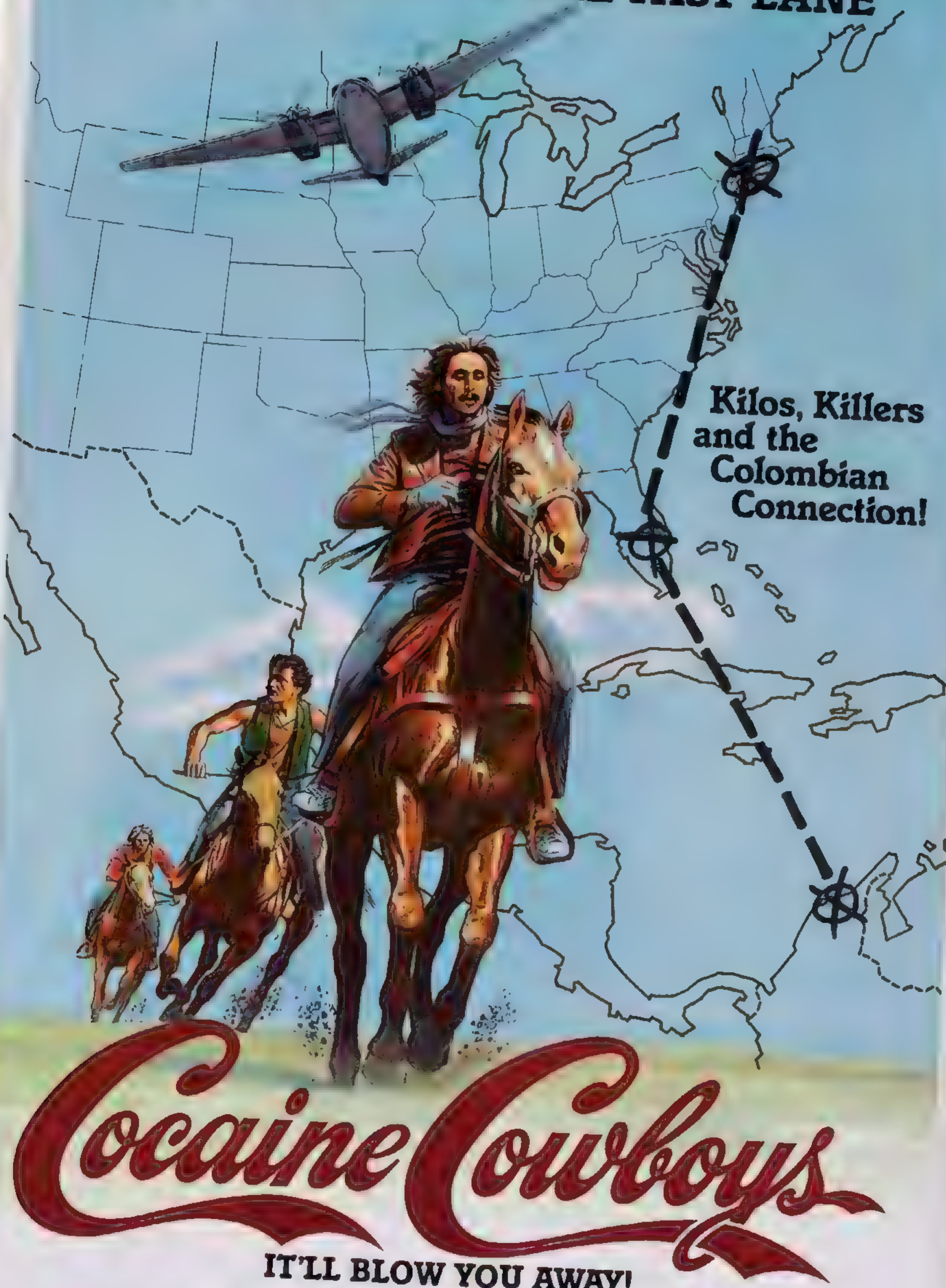
ABOVE The Black Widow's 1997 mugshot



ABOVE Two men were killed in a hail of bullets and two bystanders injured during a hit at the Dadeland Mall in 1979



# ROCK 'N ROLL IN THE FAST LANE

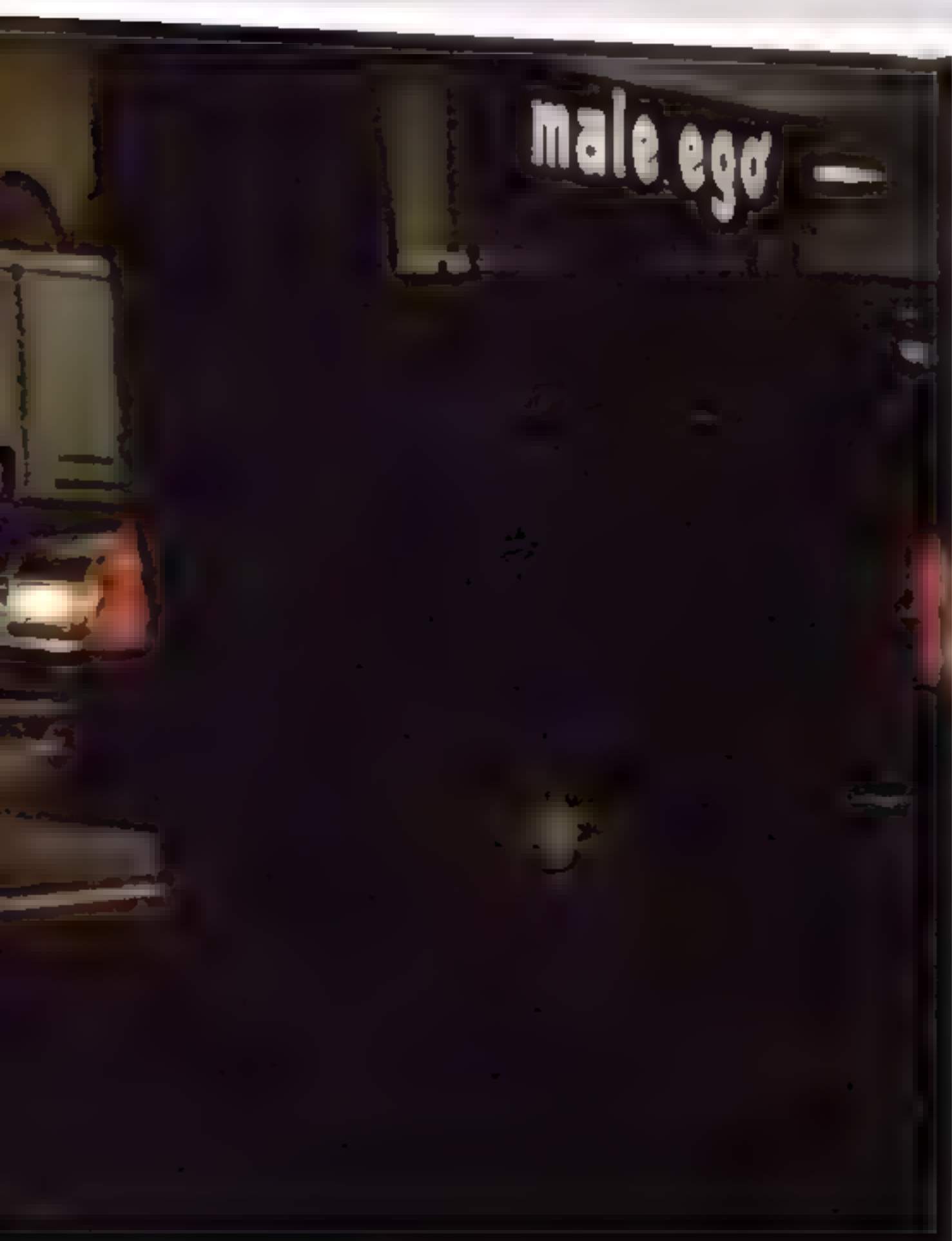


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Griselda Blanco featured in the 2006 documentary *Cocaine Cowboys*, as well as its 2008 sequel



Burnstein, the author of *The Detroit True Crime Chronicles*. "She was notoriously bloodthirsty and power hungry."

Alleged to have been responsible for up to 200 murders – including the 1979 Dadeland Mall Massacre, which ushered in the 'Cocaine Cowboys' era in Miami – Blanco was as vicious as the most deadly mafioso; a mistress of murder and cocaine who didn't take any shortcuts and won by any means necessary. "The numbers surrounding her reign in the drug game are staggering," says Burnstein. "She was responsible for hundreds of slayings and hundreds of thousands of kilos trafficked."

According to drug trafficking lore, Griselda Blanco was the inventor of the motorcycle drive-by shooting. That's not actually the case, but she was certainly the first to deploy it as a regular tactic and make it her signature move.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NARCO GANGS

IN THE NARCO WORLD, WOMEN USUALLY PLAY MINOR ROLES, IF ANY AT ALL. THIS MAKES WHAT GRISELDA BLANCO DID EVEN MORE AMAZING

The United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime produced a report in October 2019 that investigated what roles women play in drug trafficking organisations in Colombia. It suggested that women generally work preparing food for labourers, as coca leaf pickers, and as chemists using chemical processes to extract cocaine from the raw materials. They also work as mules at the trafficking end of things. Of course, there have always been exceptions like Griselda Blanco, but women tend to be employed in supportive capacities further down the hierarchy, and the organisational and management side is still mostly a patriarchal affair.

"It was extremely unusual that Griselda Blanco, a woman from an impoverished background, became such a key player in the cocaine trade," says Hughes. "As Robert Nieves, one of the DEA agents in our show, *Real Narcos*, put it: 'I think initially there was a bit of surprise from all of us that a woman would be sitting at the top of a criminal organisation. I don't want to sound chauvinistic, but it was surprising at that time to hear of a woman who was running a criminal organisation, engaged in the violent end of the business, in other words the 'Al Capone' side of the business.'"

On *Real Narcos*, historian Elaine Carey makes the point that there have been very few women who were the architects and designers of highly sophisticated organised crime entities, but Blanco was certainly one. "The fact that she had a low level of literacy and created these highly sophisticated organisations was exceptional," says Carey. "The ability to overcome this and develop this highly sophisticated criminal mind is pretty amazing."

Legend holds that the Black Widow ordered her men to ride motorbikes because they kept getting stuck in traffic when they were looking to kill her enemies.

"Blanco never invented the motorcycle hit," says Chepesiuk. "Sicarios [hired killers] had been using it for some time in Colombia. I think she can be credited with importing the motorcycle hit to Miami and the US though."

In the late 70s and 80s, the violence in Miami was off the charts as the cocaine trade exploded in the US. The city was the main point of entry for the Colombians and they were making crazy money. In the early days, different crews, both Colombian and Cuban, clashed over the markets and territories, trying to establish who would control the trade. Naturally, the Black Widow was in the mix, calling shots and giving orders.



"Given the money to be made, gangsters in South Florida jockeyed for position and this led to an explosion of violence," explains Chepesiuk. "Griselda was willing to do what she had to do and this contributed to the violence."

The streets of Miami became a war zone. It was like *Grand Theft Auto* for real. People think *Scarface* is a movie but all that was real and the Black Widow was at the centre of the action. Be it kilos of cocaine, houses full of money, strategic and retaliatory assassinations, or luxury items and property.

But it wasn't to last. Blanco was arrested by the DEA in 1985 and sentenced to 15 years for the outstanding 1975 drug charges. While she was serving time, Blanco was still dabbling in the drug game. She recruited a significantly younger African-American lover, Charles Cosby, to run her new network in LA. She plugged him in with her contacts back home, who supplied him with unlimited numbers of kilos to sell on the California black market. Blanco figured if she was doing time for cocaine she might as well keep making money from cocaine.

While she was incarcerated, officials tried to press additional charges, including three murders, but the case fell apart. In 1994, her former hitman, Jorge 'Rivi' Ayala, was ready to testify against her and the feds were looking at the death penalty, but, as Cipollini explains, the case span "into a scandalous fiasco when her former hitman-turned-witness and an alleged boyfriend both engaged in phone sex calls with staffers in the prosecutor's office. Whether or not the scandal was another methodical effort by Griselda or simply a bizarre happenstance, it wreaked havoc on the prosecution's case and gave the defence a huge advantage in challenging the witnesses' credibility."

It's been speculated that Ayala may have even botched the case on purpose, fearing for his life. Either way, the death penalty was off the table.

## “PEOPLE THINK SCARFACE IS A MOVIE BUT IT WAS ALL REAL, AND THE BLACK WIDOW WAS AT THE CENTRE OF THE ACTION”

It wasn't bribery or cunning that helped Griselda avoid death row, says Hughes, it was pure luck: "In a situation of extraordinary farce, out of nowhere, news broke that a secretary for the lead prosecutor at the state attorney's office had been fired for having phone sex with a key witness for the prosecution. The state attorney's office had to recuse themselves from the investigation into Griselda Blanco. The murder case against her was totally compromised."

Ultimately, Blanco pleaded guilty to the murder charges in return for a deal with the prosecutors and was handed a ten-year sentence – a relative slap on the wrist when you consider all of her criminal behaviour in a global context.

'La Madrina' (The Godmother) avoided death row, didn't serve the full term she'd been sentenced to, and in 2004 was released and deported back to her hometown of Medellín in Colombia. Back on home soil, in true style, she vanished without a trace. For eight years she was in hiding. An alleged cell phone photo of her in 2007 showed she was still alive, although some theorised her days were numbered. It was obvious that Blanco was laying low. "She'd made a lot of enemies in Colombia over the years, and old grudges hadn't been forgotten or forgiven," explains Hughes.

"Apparently she'd retired, but you can't cut a path through the cocaine underworld like that and not make enemies: grieving relatives, angry business partners..." agrees

Vorobyov. "A lot of very dangerous people and they all wanted her dead."

Back in Colombia and with the Medellín Cartel a thing of the past, Blanco no longer had the power or generated the type of fear she had in her heyday. In 2006, as she was trying to stay alive, a documentary film was released and gained worldwide acclaim. *Cocaine Cowboys* introduced the legend of Griselda Blanco to the general public. Many people were previously unaware of any women serving as major drug lords within the cartels, let alone one as ruthless as the Black Widow, who killed her husbands and lovers at will.

"The documentary was the beginning of the legend and *Cocaine Cowboys II* focused solely on her exploits," says Kevin Chiles. "She named her youngest son Michael Corleone and her three oldest sons were killed when they were deported back to Colombia."

On 3 September 2012, as the legend of Blanco was becoming more mainstream, she was gunned down outside a butcher shop in Medellín. This was a rare trip out in public for the Godmother. As she stepped back onto the street, she looked up to see two men on a motorbike speeding towards her.

"A sicario rode up on a motorbike and blew her brains out," says Vorobyov. "The same kind of ride-by shooting she used to be known for."



**ABOVE** After the Dadeland Mall Massacre, the hitmen escaped in a van crudely decorated as a party supply company

**BELOW** Jorge 'Rivi' Ayala, the former hitman who agreed to testify against Griselda Blanco







© Alamy, Niko Vorobyov

The shocked store clerk had no idea that the old lady who'd been slain before him was responsible for hundreds of murders. Now, La Madrina is buried in the same cemetery as Escobar on the side of a hill overlooking Medellín.

"Griselda's past caught up with her," explains Chepesiuk. "She had killed a lot of people and created a lot of enemies. I was not surprised when she was killed."

Shortly before her death, Blanco and her son Michael sold the rights to their story to a Hollywood film company. The motion picture is still awaiting production.

"Besides [Blanco's] authorised story, Catherine Zeta-Jones starred in a story about her life and Jennifer Lopez has announced that she is planning to star in and produce a story increasing and continuing the legend of La Madrina,"

says Kevin Chiles. Her legacy still rings loud in underworld circles today, mainly for the fact that she was a woman whose reputation for ruthlessness rivals any male figure of the infamous Cocaine Cowboys era in South Florida.

The fact that Blanco lasted so many years was incredible. "Her 20-odd years at the top of the cocaine trade was pretty much unparalleled," concludes Hughes. "This longevity – the fact that she evaded the authorities for so long – gave the time and space for her cult of personality to develop."

"Plain and simple, she was the most powerful female criminal figure of our time," surmises Burnstein. "The mythology surrounding her reign resonates far and wide today and positions her as an iconic player in gangland history. She was just a force of nature in every way possible."

**ABOVE** The Black Widow was buried in Medellín in the same cemetery as fellow drug lord Pablo Escobar

## MIAMI'S COCAINE WARS

WAR RAGED IN FLORIDA AS GANGSTERS VIED FOR CONTROL OF THE OUTRAGEOUSLY LUCRATIVE COCAINE TRADE

The era of the Cocaine Cowboys began in the late 1970s when cocaine blossomed into a glamour drug. The drug was expensive but in high demand, and Miami, geographically, was the prime location for importation into the US. The era has been glamorised everywhere from *Scarface* to *Grand Theft Auto* and the reason for the bloodbath was that Blanco and the Medellín Cartel weren't the only game in town.

"Colombians, Cubans, the Mafia, corrupt law enforcement, politicians, investors, bankers and

just about everyone had a hand in the thriving business of cocaine," explains Cipollini. "That quickly led to an unprecedented level of violence, where everyone was vying for power and control."

In the early 70s the cocaine business in Miami was run out of Little Havana. The Cubans handled distribution for the Colombians at first because they had connections to the locals who would buy the cocaine.

"You had Cuban mobsters who'd been chased out of their country by Castro and already set

themselves up in the coke and gambling rackets, and weren't happy about these Colombian upstarts moving in," says Vorobyov. "Some of the Cubans even had CIA training from the Bay of Pigs. But the Colombians were more ruthless. And it wasn't just the Cubans – the Colombians fought each other as well. The Dadeland Mall massacre took place after gangsters in Blanco's crew had a falling-out over money. The murder rate doubled and apparently there were so many corpses they even ran out of space at the city morgue."





# CALI-MONEY, MURDER & MAYHEM

THE CALI CARTEL WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST, WEALTHIEST AND BLOODIEST CRIMINAL NETWORKS IN HISTORY. NO CRIME WAS OFF-LIMITS. NO ENEMY WAS BEYOND THEIR REACH

WORDS ROBERT WALSH

**C**olombia's drug cartels have long been among the wealthiest, most powerful, most violent gangs in history. Their staggering profits are matched by their brutality and the Cali Cartel was one of the most notorious. Formed during the late 1970s when cocaine was becoming fashionable, the cartel had a seemingly infinite supply at their disposal, and, thanks to an insatiable demand for the drug in the US, they made billions of dollars at the cost of thousands of lives before they were shut down. To them, only money mattered. Bloodshed meant nothing.

Unlike the rival Medellín Cartel, which was founded and run by one man, Pablo Escobar, the Cali Cartel had four founding members: Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and his

brother Miguel, José Santacruz Londoño and Hélder 'Pacho' Herrera Buitrago. Based in Santiago de Cali and originally known as the 'Gentlemen of Cali', they were from a higher social class than most traffickers, and began as kidnappers and vigilantes. Start-up capital of around \$700,000 came from their kidnap-for-ransom racket and large-scale marijuana trafficking. Having learned the marijuana smuggling business only too well, as the 1980s dawned they moved into something far more lucrative: cocaine.

Smuggling had long been a Colombian tradition. Contraband of all kinds had been smuggled into, out of and around Colombia long before the cartels reared their heads. By the 1970s the global drug trade had become one





Colombia's National Police chief General Rosso José Serrano helped mastermind the Cali Cartel arrests

of the most lucrative (and hazardous) criminal enterprises on Earth and Cali took full advantage. Initially on friendly terms with the Medellín and Norte del Valle cartels, Cali's rise owed as much to its biggest enemy as its allies.

America's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had been leaders in anti-drug activity for years, but not when it came to cocaine. The DEA didn't see cocaine as a serious threat at first, describing it in a report as "Not physically addictive... does not usually result in serious consequences, such as crime, hospital emergency room admissions or both."

That rather embarrassing position would obviously change over time. Cartel activity and bloodshed increasingly blighted American society and the public demanded action,

but by then Cali was already firmly established. 'Pacho' Herrera had set up a base in New York with cocaine smuggled via Miami, but this sparked tension with Medellín and their Miami representative, the notorious 'Godmother' Griselda Blanco. The era of the 'Cocaine Cowboys' was about to begin.

With the DEA ignoring the cocaine trade, making the switch from trafficking marijuana had been an obvious choice for the Cali Cartel. Besides, more drugs could be shipped and the profit margin was far greater. Small boats and light aircraft could carry a very limited number of 25-kilo marijuana bales, whereas hundreds of kilos of powder could occupy the same space.



From the beginning, Cali's structure differed significantly from other cartels such as Medellín. Most criminal groups have firmly defined hierarchies based around a single leader. Cali had several leaders and was organised on a cell structure. Smaller independent groups reported to 'celenos' ('managers'), who brought information and profits to cartel founders and delivered orders to the rank-and-file.

Its structure resembled a spy ring or terrorist group more than a gang. Unlike traditionally organised groups, the Cali could at first be mistaken for entirely separate, much smaller gangs rather than a single, larger organisation. Its scope and power could very easily be underestimated at first, though that changed over time. As the cartel grew in power and scope, its reputation grew with it. Eventually the DEA recognised Cali and its cocaine trafficking for the threats they truly were. Indeed, the DEA chief Thomas Constantine would go on to describe them as "The biggest, most powerful crime syndicate we've ever known."

While the Cali Cartel's growth was aided by the DEA's initial naivety, its survival lay in violence, intelligence-gathering and corruption. The cartel's bribes were huge, its violence legendary and its intelligence operation first-rate. The combination of bribes and brutality was a reflection of the Colombian slang term 'plata o plomo' – silver or lead (take the money or take a bullet). The cartel's intelligence operation was so effective, the DEA later compared it to the KGB.

Unlike other cartels, Cali shifted its drug-production outside Colombia. Labs and factories moved to Peru and Bolivia, while Cali developed new smuggling routes via Panama. Panama's then-dictator Manuel Noriega was only too happy to let them operate for a percentage, also allowing money-laundering via Panamanian banks.

The cartel had far less interest in heroin. They grew and refined opium, hired a chemist to improve its refinement, and some cartel associates trafficked it, but it was never a major product. The Cali Cartel has also been accused of co-operating with heroin distributors, but precisely how heavily is debatable. There was some involvement, but not on a huge scale. While some senior associates also trafficked heroin, Cali leaders themselves often kept it at arm's length. Cocaine profits were so astronomical, heroin was never a vital market, and heroin drew far more attention from anti-drug agencies. According to the DEA, at one point the Cali Cartel produced 70% of the cocaine reaching the US and 90% of the drug sold in Europe, earning \$7 billion a year.

With enormous profits comes the need to conceal them. Cali's chief accountant, Guillermo Pallomari, oversaw a vast operation disguising and laundering illegal funds worldwide. Some profits Pallomari laundered, others he invested in legitimate businesses. Still more went into a network of front companies whose real purpose was laundering cartel profits.

The cartel made so much money that entire banks became laundries for Cali cash. Gilberto Orejuela became Chairman of the Board at Banco de Trabajadores and founded the First InterAmericas Bank in Panama. Laundered money also built the Grupo Radial Colombiano media group and the Drogas de Rebaja pharmaceutical chain. Outside Colombia, a real estate company in St Petersburg was a conduit for cartel cash. Its co-founder, Rudolf Ritter, was arrested in Leichtenstein in May 2000 for laundering cartel profits.

When Cali's leaders were brought down in the mid-1990s, Pallomari became a key witness, offering names, dates, amounts, financial records and details of front companies.



Illegal drug profits are staggering. Seized in 2007, this stack of cash is merely pocket change to major drug traffickers

## “ PANAMA'S THEN-DICTATOR MANUEL NORIEGA WAS HAPPY TO LET CALI OPERATE FOR A PERCENTAGE, AND ALLOWED MONEY LAUNDERING VIA PANAMANIAN BANKS ”

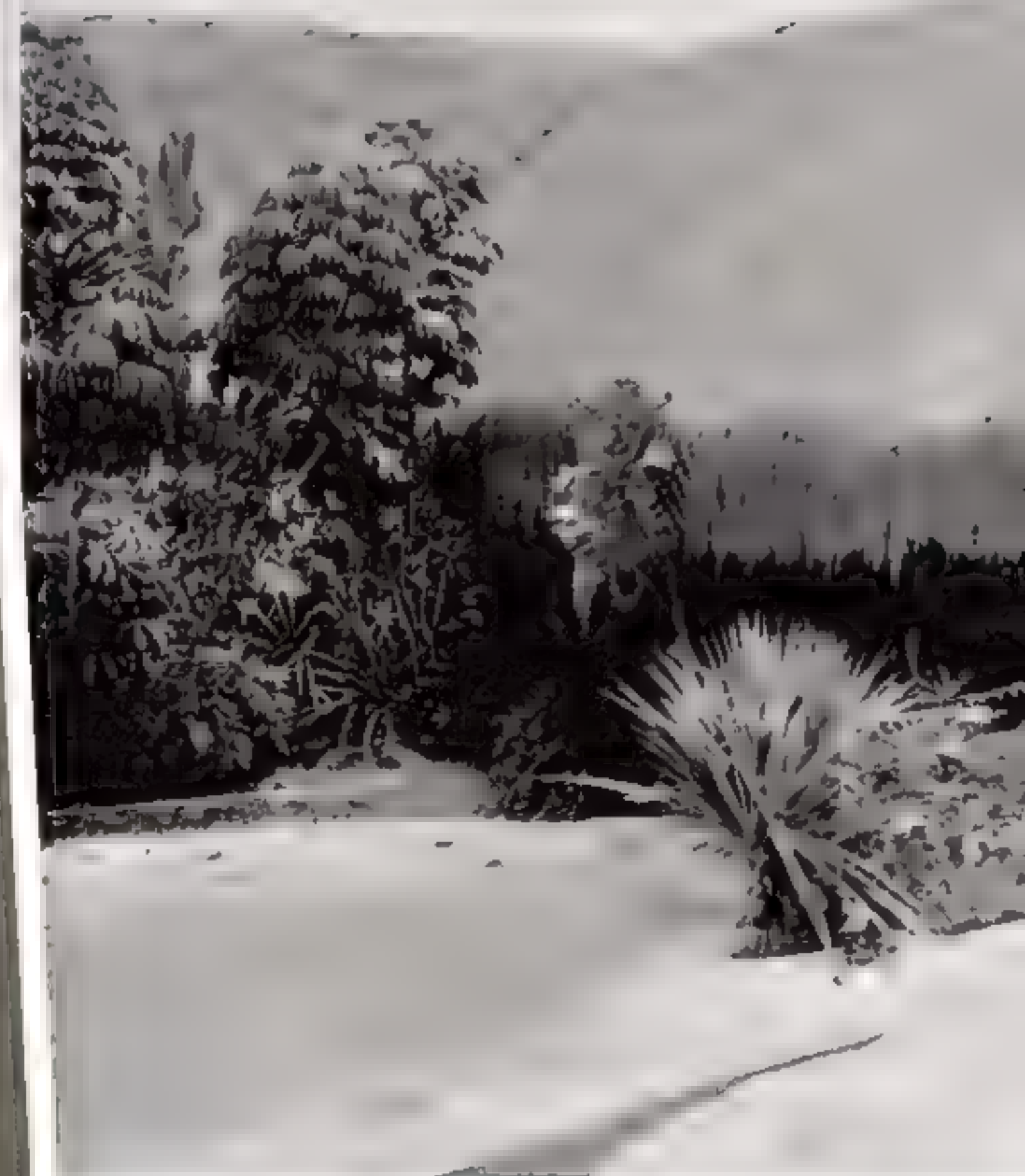
He knew where the bodies were buried and the profits hidden. When he testified, Pallomari knew as much as anybody about the cartel's dealings and did as much as anybody to convict its members.

Relations with other cartels were friendly at first, at least until Herrera established himself in New York. Medellín had ceded control of New York to Cali, only for senior Medellín figure Rodríguez Gacha to set up his own operation in the city. Cali leaders felt Gacha was violating their agreement. With Miami already turning into a warzone, Medellín's move did nothing to calm things down.

In turn, Medellín leaders blamed Cali when Medellín trafficker Jorge Ochoa was arrested in Madrid in 1984, suspecting Cali figures of arranging Ochoa's capture. Ochoa was a childhood friend of Gilberto Orejuela and co-owner of the First InterAmericas Bank, and many felt his arrest was as much a personal betrayal as a business decision. Whether Cali were actually responsible is another matter.

Former Cali allies in the Norte del Valle cartel were equally displeased. Neither group was comfortable with the rise of the Cali Cartel – tension and suspicion built to fever pitch and open warfare erupted within and outside Colombia's borders. If Cali could be put out of business, Medellín and Norte del Valle could also divide Cali's multi-billion-dollar business among themselves.

The resulting 'Cartel Wars' involved seemingly endless violence. Dozens of bombings and hundreds of murders



TOP Colombia's Special Forces were founded in the 1980s and trained in anti-drug operations by Britain's SAS

ABOVE When not on search-and-destroy missions in the jungle, Colombian commandos frequently raided the luxury homes of traffickers





turned Colombia into a shooting gallery. The scale of cocaine-related crime and violence in Miami also attracted increasing attention from the American press and, belatedly, the DEA. The US government, now under increasing pressure, unleashed the DEA and other Federal agencies in the ongoing 'war on drugs'.

Rival cartels and the DEA were not Cali's only enemies. Colombian guerrilla groups the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) kidnapped Cali members and their relatives for huge ransoms, leading to war with the cartel. FARC also had its own competing drug business. Funds from trafficking bought weapons and supplies, and the cartels were its major competitors.

Senior military figures also attacked the cartels without government orders, even hiring foreign mercenaries to

## BOMBS, BULLETS AND BETRAYAL

**JORGE SALCEDO CABRERA HAD NEVER REALLY WANTED TO JOIN CALI. UNWILLINGLY MADE ITS HEAD OF SECURITY, NOBODY WAS BETTER PLACED TO BRING IT DOWN**

Former army officer, counter-surveillance expert and civil engineer Cabrera was approached by the cartel in 1989 and left in 1995. Recruited to hire foreign mercenaries to murder Medellín boss Pablo Escobar, Cabrera hatched a plot to murder him at his palatial Hacienda Nápoles. It failed when a helicopter crash left most of the team unable to reach their target.

A later plot involved using a war-surplus bomber to destroy a prison where Escobar was being held. The plot was uncovered, costing Cabrera his army membership and his co-conspirators their liberty. Already disillusioned with the cartel, their refusal to let him leave after Escobar's death in 1993 saw Cabrera find another escape route: covertly assisting the DEA.

Cabrera was working for cartel leader Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, the same cartel boss who forced him to stay after Escobar's death. In June 1995 Cabrera met secretly with DEA agents Chris Feistl and David Mitchell. Orejuela had no idea his own security chief was betraying him. With the agents Cabrera formulated a plan to raid Orejuela's apartment building that July.

The first raid failed and Orejuela slipped away, leaving Cabrera under suspicion. Demoted by Orejuela, Cabrera still managed to set him up again in August. This time a raid on the Hacienda Buenos Aires was successful. After arranging to extract cartel chief accountant Guillermo Pallomari (whom Orejuela had ordered him to kill) a few days later, Cabrera entered the Federal Witness Protection Program in August 1995. Pallomari became the DEA's key witness.

© Getty Images



Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela was a founder member of the Cali Cartel. He was betrayed by his chief protector



# SOCIAL CLEANSING - PURGING THE 'DISCARDABLES'

VIGILANTISM AGAINST SOCIETY'S UNDESIRABLES HAS A LONG HISTORY IN COLOMBIA. THE CALI CARTEL MADE IT ONE OF THEIR HIGHEST PRIORITIES

All societies have undesirable elements, known in Colombia as 'desechables' or 'discardables'. Here, street children, prostitutes, vagrants, homosexuals, petty crooks and small-time drug dealers are seen as problems to be removed by any means. Studies suggest nearly 5,000 were killed between 1988 and 2013.

Often assisted by police, vigilantes periodically purge them. They are routinely dumped in public with cards or notes stating in Spanish 'Cali clean, Cali beautiful'. In 1992 some 74% were murdered by the police or their paramilitary contacts, others by ordinary citizens.

Social cleansing flourished in the 1980s with the Cali Cartel among its most vicious practitioners. With so many bodies dumped in it, the Cauca River was christened the 'River of Death' by local residents. The municipality of Marsella was even bankrupted by recovering corpses and performing autopsies. Purges are brutal fixes to social problems often supported or even demanded by local businesses and citizens. As of 1995 at least 40 death squads operated in Colombia, often with the police supporting them or as active members.

Before a purge, pamphlets are often distributed locally warning potential targets. Unofficial curfews are imposed and any 'disposable' violating them can expect summary justice. For 'disposables' the choice is brutally simple: leave or die. They are seen only as a social curse to be annihilated. Rather than tackling societal problems with welfare and social schemes, the cartel murdered 'disposables' in large numbers. Although the cartel itself is gone that practice remains. Many Colombians, though not all, have little problem with that.



**ABOVE** Cali's communications expert Gilberto Mora Mesa had more than 40 phones tapped, including those of Colombia's Justice, Defence and Interior Ministers

assassinate Escobar and other major traffickers. Disgusted at the corruption and frustrated by their own government's inability to tackle the problem, they decided to tackle it themselves. As the Cali Cartel grew in profits, power and influence, it became an ever-larger target for enemies both at home and abroad.

In turn, Cali's leaders secretly recruited army officer Jorge Salcedo Cabrera, who later became Miguel Orejuela's head of security. Cabrera had originally acted against the cartels, recruiting mercenaries for deniable operations on behalf of senior Colombian military figures. Cali's leaders, especially Miguel, knew that if Cabrera could send mercenaries against them, he could also recruit for them.

Their prime target would be the most infamous trafficker of all, Medellín Cartel boss and former ally Pablo Escobar. Cabrera's contacts in the mercenary business allowed Cali to send foreign mercenaries against Escobar, some of whose would-be assassins had once worked for him. Seeking another contract and with no loyalty to Escobar or Medellín, they were happy to work for whoever paid them. However, in time, recruiting Cabrera would be Cali's downfall.

Life within the cartel could be very lucrative, but also very short. By the mid-1980s the DEA was finally tackling



Cali's homeless were among those targeted for social cleansing. They could expect summary slaughter and little else





Cali and other cartels. The British Government covertly assigned SAS teams to train Colombian Special Forces in anti-drug operations. SAS operatives often accompanied them on reconnaissance and search-and-destroy missions.

Inter-cartel violence within Colombia was also at its worst. Bombings, kidnappings and murders were rampant, especially in Colombia and Miami. Further afield, foreign law enforcement agencies were also freezing foreign bank accounts and gathering intelligence. Through this intelligence-gathering and the use of undercover agents and informers, large drug shipments were seized and cartel employees arrested, further intensifying suspicions and straining relations within the cartel itself. Law enforcement's net was finally beginning to close.

When Pablo Escobar was killed by Colombian police unit Search Bloc in December 1993, Jorge Salcedo Cabrera, who'd been recruited by Miguel Orejuela specifically to arrange Escobar's death, asked if he could leave the cartel. With Escobar dead and Medellín weakening under increasing pressure, Cabrera considered his job done. Orejuela refused, forcing a disillusioned Cabrera to continue as head of security. Orejuela's refusal forced Cabrera into the willing hands of the DEA's Operation Cornerstone.



**ABOVE** Phanor Arizabaleta-Arzayus in 2011, on his extradition to the US. He was the fifth most important in the chain of command

Orejuela had entrusted Cabrera with his personal security after the capture of Cabrera's predecessor, Mario del Basto, in 1995. Never an enthusiastic cartel figure to begin with, working for Orejuela under duress only deepened Cabrera's disgust. Witnessing the brutal murders of four suspected informers finally forced Cabrera into a life-changing decision. Initially head of Cali's intelligence and now its head of security, nobody was better-placed to destroy the cartel from within.

In June 1995 Cabrera contacted first the CIA and then DEA agents Chris Feistl and David Mitchell. Feistl and Mitchell, both based in the city of Cali, knew Cabrera was the most valuable informant since Operation Cornerstone had begun four years earlier. Search Bloc and the DEA were only too happy to do business. The cartel's destruction was now only a few clandestine meetings away.

Cali's leaders and their senior henchmen fell like dominoes over the next few months. Gilberto Orejuela was arrested on 9 June and Henry Ceballos surrendered ten days later. Victor Patiño-Fomeque followed him five days after that, and Phanor Arizabaleta-Arzayus surrendered on 8 July. Miguel Orejuela was captured in August. Jose Santacruz Londoño was killed by Colombian police in March the following year, while Hélder Herrera Buitrago surrendered in September 1996 and was murdered in a Colombian prison two years later.

Despite being Pablo's nephew, Juan Carlos Ortiz Escobar had joined Cali instead of Medellín. He was murdered in 2002. Mery Valencia de Ortiz survived running the Miami end of Cali's operation, serving 12 years in a Federal Correctional Institution and vanishing after her release in 2012. The Orejuela brothers were eventually released but reoffended and imprisoned again. They're eligible for parole in 2030.

And what of informant Jorge Salcedo Cabrera? He vanished with his family into the Federal Witness Protection Program, where they still remain. He regrets ever having been involved with the cartel and his whereabouts are a closely guarded secret.

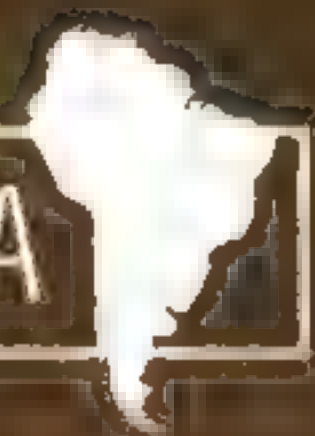


Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela was one of the Cali Cartel's leaders and one of the first to fall

**“ INITIALLY THE HEAD OF CALI'S INTELLIGENCE AND NOW ITS HEAD OF SECURITY, CABRERA COULD DESTROY THE CARTEL FROM WITHIN ”**

© Getty Images





# LOS URABEÑOS: COLOMBIA'S NEW NARCOS

AS PARAMILITARY AND GUERRILLA ORGANISATIONS  
DEMOBILISE IN COLOMBIA, AN UPSTART FROM THE REMOTE  
NORTH HAS BECOME ONE OF THE LARGEST AND MOST  
FEARED GANGS IN THE COUNTRY

WORDS DAVID HUTT

In January 2012, much of northern Colombia came to a halt. Most shops and businesses closed their doors. Buses stopped running. And a night-time curfew was imposed on residents. But this didn't come from an overzealous government edict but the orders of Colombia's largest gang, Los Urabeños.

The shutdown came days after the narco-trafficking group's leader was shot dead by police during a New Year's Eve party on his ranch. The inhabitants living in Urabeños-controlled areas were told to stay indoors to honour "the dedication and sacrifice" of Juan de Dios Úsuga, the slain leader, a distributed pamphlet read.

Also known as Clan Úsuga – though members prefer the name, the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – Los Urabeños, according to the Colombian government in 2013, was the only "criminal band" left with a nationwide presence. In the same year, intense fighting left 9,000 people displaced from the city of Buenaventura, a coastal seaport city, which was described as one of Colombia's worst humanitarian crises in years, according to Human Rights Watch.

It is estimated that Los Urabeños controls anywhere between a third and half of all the 300 tonnes of cocaine shipped to the United States each year. "With an estimated 2,000 active members, the Urabeños are now arguably Colombia's most powerful criminal organisation," reads a report by InSight Crime, a Medellín-based think tank that tracks organised crime in Colombia.

## THE BEGINNINGS

Although the gang is named after the Urabá region, located between the departments of Chocó, Antioquia, and Córdoba, and in the country's northwest, along the Panamanian border, it traces its history to the country's eastern plains and a man named Daniel Rendón Herrera, or 'Don Mario', who was a financier for the Centauros Bloc, a paramilitary organisation.

It was the late 1990s, and Colombia's narco-gangs were engaged in fierce competition with one another. Pablo Escobar had died a few years earlier and the Cali Cartel's dominance was all but over after the arrest of its leader. The narco scene was changing. Instead of the cartels, the left-



FROM THE  
REAL  
**CRIME**  
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JULY 2017





## ANTI-CORRUPTION GANGSTERISM

GANG BOSSES LIKE TO CULTIVATE AN ETHOS OF RESPECTABILITY FOR ITS CAREER CRIMINALS

While most people know the gang as Los Urabeños, its own members prefer a more pretentious and self-reverential name, one that speaks of its supposed noble intentions. According to its founder, Daniel 'Don Mario' Herrera, officially named it the 'Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia', a reference to the Colombian populist politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. His murder in 1948 was a catalyst to a ten-year civil war between the country's conservatives and liberals known as La Violencia. "Their Gaitanist philosophy is supposedly one that rails against corruption and politicking. Whoever wants to go further in their criminal structure has to study the works of Gaitán," Natalia Rendon, the specialist organised crime prosecutor tasked with leading the effort to prosecute the gang, has told media.



wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries were to scrap it out for control of cocaine routes, rather than ideology.

The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) was the largest of the paramilitary outfits, yet it historically lacked control of the eastern plains, an area dominated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a guerrilla group. So, the Centauros Bloc was established to take over the eastern drug production facilities and trafficking routes, with some success.

In 2001, the AUC's chiefs – the Castaño brothers – sold the Centauros Bloc 'franchise' to an associate named Miguel Arroyave, who had ended a three-year stretch in jail. For roughly \$7 million, Arroyave bought control of most of Colombia's eastern plains. He was the one who convinced Don Mario to come and work as the gang's financier.

The pair were immediately successful. But this didn't go unnoticed by rival gangs. One in particular, the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Casanare (ACC), took exception as many of the Centauros Bloc's members were not locals. It is thought that the ACC were the first to call Centauros Bloc's members "Urabeños" – or "those from Urabá".

Tensions between the two groups came to a head in 2004 when the two paramilitary groups clashed, leaving an estimated 3,000 people dead in a matter of months. During the conflict, Don Mario and Arroyave also had a falling out. Fearing for his life, Don Mario fled from the eastern plains and returned to Urabá, where his brother was the leader of a smaller paramilitary outfit, the Elmer Cardenas Bloc.

The Don Mario and Arroyave fracture was generally believed to be true for many years – and still might be true – but another explanation has been put forward as to why

Don Mario returned to Urabá. In the mid 2000s, as the AUC began to disband, it is thought that the group's chief spokesman Vicente Castaño disobeyed the government's demands and secretly told his closest allies, Don Mario being one, not to turn themselves in and to form new paramilitary organisations – which are now known as neo-paramilitary groups. How much of a hand Castaño had in the actual inner workings of Los Urabeños in its early years remains unknown, but his legacy is clear; one of the earliest names of Los Urabeños was the 'Bloque Heroes de Castaño', a name to honour his death in 2007.

As other paramilitary groups demobilised, Don Mario recruited many former fighters and expanded his own narco-trafficking group, the one we now know as Los Urabeños. He also recruited ex-members of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), a communist guerrilla group that partially disbanded in 1991. Upon dissolution, many of its former members were harassed and accused of being traitors to the revolutionary cause by the still-fighting FARC. Indeed, it was ex-EPL fighters who were behind one of the first paramilitary outfits, the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU), and who would go on to become the main figures of the AUC when it formed in 1997.

Location was important for Don Mario. Urabá, which means "promised land" in the indigenous tongue, is dense

**ABOVE** A member of a Colombian gang displays a gun in Medellín, a city controlled by Pablo Escobar until his death in 1993

**ABOVE RIGHT** Police officers stand next to a Metro bus burned during a 24-hour strike enforced by Los Urabeños in 2016

**“ BY 2008, LOS URABEÑOS HAD BECOME ONE OF THE MOST WEALTHY AND NOTORIOUS NARCO-GANGS IN COLOMBIA ”**





with mountains, hills and forests, essential for the clandestine production of cocaine. It also sits at one of the most important drug movement corridors in the world. Ample coastline allows easy access to the Caribbean and Central America by sea, while a short trip across the Darién Gap finds you in Panama, a key launching point for traffickers heading to El Norte.

Don Mario “monopolised this important drug route, taxing traffickers for every kilo of cocaine that passed through his territory. It was a lucrative business,” reads a report by InSight Crime. “The tax was \$400 per kilo. And with up to 20 go-fast boats leaving the gulf every week, each capable of carrying two tons of cocaine, Don Mario was making close to \$20 million per month.”

### A CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP

By 2008, Los Urabeños was one of the most wealthy and notorious narco-gangs in Colombia. Don Mario’s notoriety, however, wasn’t to last for long. In April 2009 he was arrested when more than 200 police commandos launched a raid of his farm in rural Urabá. With his imprisonment, authority was handed down to the Úsuga brothers: Juan de Dios, also known as ‘Giovanni’, and Dairo Antonio, or ‘Otoniel’. The pair had been working as mid-ranking fighters for Don Mario since the late 1990s.

In 2012, Giovanni was slain in a shootout with police at his ranch on New Year’s Eve. In the aftermath, Los Urabeños called for another “armed strike”, paralysing over 150 municipalities in four Colombian departments, and offered \$1,000 for every police officer killed.



**ABOVE** The body of a woman murdered by drug gangs is taken away by a forensics team in Colombia’s most notorious neighbourhood, Comuna 13 – a Los Urabeños stronghold in the city of Medellín



Today, it is thought that Los Urabeños is still headed by Otoniel, who has eluded arrest for decades despite a \$6 million bounty on his head: the United States is offering \$5 million and the Colombian government \$1 million. Some think this makes him Latin America's most wanted drug trafficker, following the arrest of the Sinaloa Cartel's Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán in January 2016.

Under Otoniel's control, Los Urabeños became a force to be reckoned with. A 2013 report by the International Criminal Court found that "[t]here is a reasonable basis to believe the Urabeños group is sufficiently organised because, inter alia, its members are well-disciplined; there is a hierarchical structure; effective control is exercised over its members; it exercises control over territory; it has the capacity to recruit and acquire weapons; and it has a significant number of personnel."

How much Otoniel personally rules it is still up in the air, yet experts say Los Urabeños has traditionally operated with a pyramid structure. However, the arrests and murders of several of the organisation's leaders, most notably Otoniel's second in command, Roberto Vargas Gutierrez, alias 'Gavilan', who was killed by security forces in 2017, has left Otoniel isolated and under pressure. Following Gavilan's murder, Otoniel even offered to turn himself in and demobilise the Urabeños.

Despite the pyramid structure, Los Urabeños is not as centrally organised as most other groups in Colombia. It is thought that each local 'bloc' operates somewhat autonomously, with money flowing up the chain of command but few instructions heading the other way. Indeed, there are even reports that Los Urabeños occasionally acts as a franchise, with smaller gangs using its name to instil fear but without having any direct relation with the group's leaders.

And, in many ways, Los Urabeños has much more in common with conventional, Central American gangs than the cartels known in Colombia's past. "Whereas Pablo Escobar made 100 per cent of his money trafficking drugs, the Urabeños may make only 50 per cent of their money that way," Jeremy McDermott, co-director of InSight Crime, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "They have a vastly more diverse criminal portfolio than their predecessors and what they are interested in is getting a cut, mafia-style, of all the action."

## THE GOVERNMENT FIGHTS BACK

Los Urabeños' success certainly didn't go unnoticed by the government. In early 2015, it launched an offensive, known as Operation Agamemnon, to cripple the gang's operations. 1,000 soldiers and more than 1,200 police officers spent months searching the mountains and jungles of Urabá in an effort to capture Otoniel, an effort that many naturally compared to the infamous 'Search Bloc', a special task force established to hunt down the Medellín drug lord Pablo Escobar. But, unlike the 'Search Bloc', Operation Agamemnon did not end with the target's death. Nonetheless, the authorities did uncover considerable amounts of organisational material, including gang codes, combat manuals and even disciplinary records.

In March 2016, the police shot dead Rubén Darío Ávila, alias 'Lorenzo', who was thought to be one of the gang's leaders. His death – yet again coming with a raid on a ranch – was heralded by Colombia's president, Juan Manuel Santos, who tweeted: "Body blow to the Clan Úsuga gang" – using another name for the gang – "Alias Lorenzo taken out in Urabá. Top gang leader and drug trafficker."



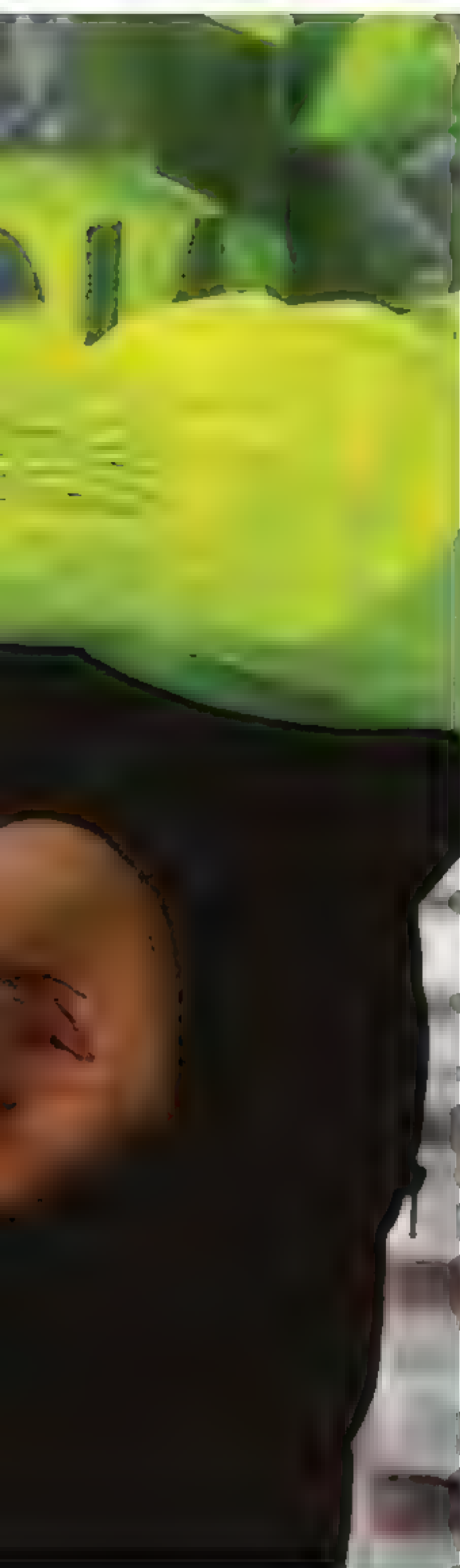
Jacinto Nicolás Fuentes Germán, accused of being a key member of Los Urabeños, was arrested in Peru in 2013







**ABOVE** Counter-narcotics police guard an under-construction drug-smuggling sub that was seized from Los Urabeños in Puerto Escondido, Montería province, in 2011



**LEFT** An anti-narcotics policeman examines a seized pack of cocaine at a military base

Just a month earlier, the government notched another victory when two other senior members of Los Urabeños were extradited to the United States on drug trafficking charges. Arley Úsuga Torres, the nephew of gang leader Otoniel, and Héctor Mario Urdinola Arbeláez, who ran operations in the western department of Valle del Cauca, were arrested by Colombian police before being turned over to American anti-narcotic officers.

Lorenzo's death prompted another shut down of Colombia's northwest by Los Urabeños. It was reported that whole cities became ghost towns, as shopkeepers and workers were too afraid to even venture out onto the streets. "More than half of [Córdoba] province is paralysed," Conservative Party leader David Barguil told the media. "Businesses are closed and vehicles are being burned. Where are the security forces? The same is occurring in Sucre, Bolívar and Antioquia." He added, "[Córdoba] today lives under a permanent regime of terror... the most discouraging [fact] is the absence of a security policy to confront this situation." No doubt, the police were also too afraid to venture out. It is thought that a handful of police officers were assassinated across the region, presumably by gangsters from Los Urabeños.

In May 2016, the government also seized a shipment of more than eight tonnes of cocaine, valued at \$240 million, not far from the Panama border. It was believed to be the largest drug bust in Colombian history, and the narcotics are thought to have belonged to Los Urabeños.

### PEACE BESETS VIOLENCE

While the government has captured some senior leaders from the criminal outfit and disrupted its operations, experts in Colombia say its wealth and power has hardly been dented. In fact, most are concerned that Los Urabeños' dominance will only grow in the coming years.

In late 2016, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) began peace talks with the Colombian government to demobilise its guerrilla units. It was a landmark occasion after more than five decades of civil war and, although there were some problems along the way, this year the FARC began turning over its weapons and telling the once-armed peasants to return to their villages.

One great concern, however, is that as the FARC demobilises former fighters will simply change allegiances, joining either Los Urabeños or other neo-paramilitary groups; or the breakup of the FARC's control of lucrative drug-trafficking networks and routes will lead to a free-for-all among the country's gangs.

"While estimates vary greatly, the FARC's drug earnings are calculated to have been worth several hundred million dollars a year, providing the Urabeños with a financial incentive of their own to take over the guerrilla group's share of the drug trade," reads an InSight Crime report.

In January 2017, Colombian Attorney General Néstor Humberto Martínez announced that Los Urabeños was offering monthly "salaries" worth 1.8 million Colombian pesos – about \$600 – to former FARC fighters. The peace agreement, however, only offers each demobilised member of the guerrilla outfit compensation worth roughly \$6,100 over two years. Los Urabeños' going rate is \$16,300 for the same period.

So, as Colombia enters a new phase of peace, there is the very real possibility that it will only engender more violence and provide a boon for gangs like Los Urabeños.

## DRUGS, MONEY AND MURDER

THESE NEO-NARCOS PLY THE MOST LUCRATIVE TRADE COLOMBIA HAS SEEN IN YEARS

**2,000**

ACTIVE URABEÑOS MEMBERS

**\$1,000**

GANG PAY PER POLICE OFFICER KILLED

**2,400**

SIZE OF THE SEARCH FOR GANG LEADER, OTONIEL

**8.0**

tonnes  
\$240 MILLION OF COCAINE WAS SEIZED IN 2016 IN ONE OF COLOMBIA'S LARGEST BUSTS

**400**

PEOPLE ARRESTED DURING OPERATION AGAMEMNON

**\$6 MILLION**

THE REWARD FOR OTONIEL'S ARREST

**442**

tonnes  
COLOMBIA'S ANNUAL COCAINE PRODUCTION

**\$700 million**

ANNUAL URABEÑOS EARNINGS







# PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL

THEY STARTED LIFE AS A PRISON GANG BUT OVER TIME, THEY HAVE GROWN IN STRENGTH TO BECOME BRAZIL'S MOST FEARED CRIMINALS, CAPABLE OF STAGING AN AUDACIOUS 50-MAN ROBBERY IN NEIGHBOURING PARAGUAY

THE FIRST



**T**he city of Ciudad del Este sits right on Paraguay's south-eastern border with Brazil and Argentina – the so-called 'Triple Frontier'. In recent years the city has become something of a retail Mecca. The economic downturn in Brazil meant steep price rises and additional taxes on many consumer goods. Those taxes don't apply in Paraguay and so Ciudad del Este has become a cluster of glittering shopping malls, high-rise office towers containing banks that, among other services, look after plenty of cash that rich Brazilians would rather not keep in their own country, and hotels to accommodate the cross-border tourists. The city's population has swelled to over 350,000, boosted by Lebanese, Korean, Iranian and Taiwanese immigrants, who've mostly opened stores, restaurants and boutique hotels to cater to the Brazilian shoppers. Ciudad del Este is now a boomtown and Paraguay's second largest city – giant warehouse stores sell discounted electronics and luxury brands; hotels, bars and nightclubs have sprung up to amuse the weekendening tourists. Smuggling, both into Argentina and Brazil, has become a seriously rapidly growing part of the city's economy – perhaps as much as five times the size of Ciudad del Este's legitimate economy.

For the most part it's been a mutually beneficial boom – Paraguay has made money from tourism and shopping, while wealthier Brazilians have found a new mini-break destination where they can get a cheap laptops and designer handbags while stashing some cash in a local bank away from the eyes of the Brazilian taxman. It's also been a peaceful boom... that was, until 24 April 2017.

## "THE ROBBERY OF THE CENTURY"

Just after midnight, approximately 50 to 80 heavily armed attackers – dressed in military fatigues and with their faces covered with ski masks – set fire to various vehicles around the city centre of Ciudad del Este. Terrified local residents hid behind their windows but reported hearing the men shout to each other in Portuguese (Paraguayans and Argentineans speak Spanish; Brazilians speak Portuguese). The burning vehicles blocked the entrance of the city's police headquarters, which was then sprayed with automatic machine gun fire, pelted with Molotov cocktails and targeted with hand grenades. To the police inside and scared locals cowering under their kitchen tables it seemed as if an entire army had descended upon the town. And that was indeed the impression the robbers had sought to create – that of a far larger attacking force, spread out across the city to divert police attention.

It worked. While the police desperately returned fire blindly into the dark night, another group of masked and heavily armed men arrived at the offices of a Spanish cash transporting company, Prosegur. They set cars alight at each end of the street to deter anyone from venturing down it; they positioned snipers on the rooftops opposite Prosegur to kill any police attempting to get through to the building; they shot and killed one policeman on duty in his patrol car outside the office; they set up machine gun barricades facing both ways down the street and pointed an anti-aircraft rifle towards the sky in case the police tried to reach them by helicopter. Then they went to work.

The men planted explosives against the main wall of the Prosegur building and blew a substantial hole in it, allowing them to simply step into the high-security vault contained within. They then calmly stole a good chunk of the reported



The wreck of a Prosegur vehicle outside the vault, crushed by masonry sent flying by the blast

\$49 million US dollars

hidden within. Just how much is the subject of much debate – it was certainly more than \$8 million and could be as much as \$40 million.

Police eventually arrived at the scene as the robbers were about to flee. Officers started firing but were quickly both out-gunned and out-classed. The robbers were better armed, with automatic weapons, infrared sights as well as night-vision goggles, while the local cops had only their regulation handguns and a limited amount of ammunition. The gun battle raged for two hours, leaving three innocent bystanders and a policeman injured.

Eventually the robbers split into three groups and raced out of Ciudad del Este in security vans, lobbing explosives and steel spikes behind them to prevent any pursuit by the local police. Later the vans were found, abandoned along with bulletproof vests and some of the automatic weapons. There was blood inside one of the vans, indicating that at least one of the robbers had been shot and injured. However, it was also apparent that they had boarded high-speed boats

**“ THE GUN BATTLE RAGED FOR TWO HOURS, LEAVING THREE INNOCENT BYSTANDERS AND A POLICEMAN INJURED ”**





and crossed the Parana River that runs along the border of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina. The Paraguayan police halted their chase at the border. But the night wasn't quite over.

Alerted to the events in Ciudad del Este and the report of Portuguese being spoken, the Brazilian police increased patrols on their side of the Parana River. Approximately 30 miles across the border is the Brazilian resort and party town of Itaipulandia. Here, local police intercepted one of the three groups of robbers and a fresh gun battle erupted. This time the police fared much better – four robbers were shot dead and a further eight arrested.

The eight arrested were questioned and discovered to be members of Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital, or First Capital Command, usually known simply by their initials as the PCC. The Brazilian police certainly knew who First Capital Command were.

### "THE PARTY OF CRIME"

The PCC traces its origins to a prison football game in 1993. A now infamous kick-about happened at the Taubaté penitentiary, better known to its inmates as Piranhão (Big Piranha). Taubaté, just outside the official capital of São Paulo, is vast, overcrowded, brutal and insanitary – like a piranha, it eats away at you, eventually destroying you. The authorities consider Taubaté to be Brazil's most secure jail.

The match was played between a group of new arrivals who had been transferred to Taubaté for bad behaviour at São Paulo's city jail. The men got on with each other; they formed a gang and called themselves The First Capital

Command, after their home city. But this wasn't your normal prison gang, invariably formed as a method of self-protection and to control and extort other prisoners. Rather the PCC, who were often referred to as 'The Party of Crime' were overtly political. They had demands that included improving prison conditions and avenging the deaths of inmates killed in prison riots that they believed were caused by overcrowding and often inhuman conditions in the Brazilian penal system. The journalist Misha Glenny, who recently exposed Brazil's dark side in his book *Nemesis: One Man And The Battle For Rio*, a study of one specific Rio drug lord, says it is important to remember that, though now seen as bank robbers, initially they formed to oppose a completely unprovoked massacre by police special forces of 110 inmates at São Paulo's Carandiru prison.

They adopted the Chinese yin and yang symbol as their flag. The gang leaders were known by their nicknames – Misa, Fat Face, Weird, Dafé, Ugly Beast, Little César, Shadow and Big Jelly. Members of the PCC were known as 'brothers' and were asked to swear to a 16-clause Statute that, if infringed, could lead to their sanctioned murder.

By the turn of the millennium, the PCC was organised enough to co-ordinate riots in prisons across São Paulo's 29 jails. Members that were spread across the various jails communicated using smuggled mobile phones. They spread the riots to Brazil's largest city, Rio de Janeiro, by forming an alliance with another political prison gang, Rio-based Comando Vermelho (Red Command).

Inevitably perhaps, as is invariably the way with gangs, the PCC fell to infighting. A new leader emerged – Marcos

**ABOVE** A hole blasted at a precise point in the reinforced wall allowed the robbers access to the Prosegur vault. They were well-organised, well-equipped and knew just where to strike





**ABOVE** Brazilian police capture a wounded PCC member suspected of being involved in the vault robbery

**“ UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF BROTHER MARCOLA, THE PCC EFFECTIVELY DECIDED TO GO TO WAR WITH THE BRAZILIAN STATE ”**

Anderson Caetano da Silva was one of nine members of the gang captured on Brazilian turf



GRUPO DE IDENTIFICAÇÃO  
GID/PF/FIG/PR  
**ANDERSON CAETANO DA SILVA**



24 de abril de 2017

PF/FIG/PR

'Marcola' Willians Herbas Camacho, known as 'Playboy'. Marcola accused the previous leadership of turning traitor and working with the police; he put a bounty on their head. He ruthlessly obtained total control of the PCC.

Under Marcola, the PCC remained political and continues to defend what it sees as prisoners' rights – though this has included such actions as murdering judges and prison governors. By 2006 the PCC had emerged as a major political (the authorities would say terrorist) force in Brazil. It had gained members, built up a war chest through contributions by former prisoners and regimented itself with internal hierarchies and the Statute.

### AT WAR WITH THE STATE

In 2006, firmly under the leadership of Brother Marcola, the greatly enlarged and better disciplined PCC effectively decided to go to war with the Brazilian state. The level of PCC attacks stepped up – and not just within the prison system now. Former inmates, PCC Brothers now on the outside, attacked police stations, courthouses, buses transporting prisoners to and from court dates and among prisons, as well as senior policeman, judges, and their families across São Paulo state. Within not much more than a year, the PCC made an estimated 299 attacks on various institutions and individuals within the São Paulo justice and penal system. Dozens died. Misha Glenn, a long-time student of Brazilian crime who has got up-close-and-personal with many gang leaders, believes the PCC attacks were driven by the state's inroads into breaking up their prison networks and leadership structure. It was respond or disappear.

Perceiving itself, quite rightly, to be under attack, the State fought back. PCC senior Brothers in jail were put in lockdown and solitary; searches sought to confiscate the illicit mobile phones that allowed the PCC leadership to communicate with Brothers on the outside were initiated as a daily routine; a number of PCC members were killed in shoot-outs across São Paulo, while others were, according



# MONEY, DRUGS, HEISTS, DEATH

**\$49M**

Amount of US cash allegedly stored in Prosegur's vault

**1,424**

The number of prisons in Brazil – the PCC has members in every single one.

**\$32M**

Confirmed takings from Brazil's biggest ever bank heist (by the PCC)

**13,000**

Estimated total membership of the PCC

**3**

The number of PCC-led bank heists since Prosegur

**22**

Out of Brazil's 27 states, the PCC is active in 22

**500** BRAZILIAN REALS

The monthly membership fee that all free Brothers must pay (£117.60)

**\$1.5M**

Amount recovered by the Brazilian authorities

**50** BRAZILIAN REALS

The monthly membership fee all Brothers in prison must pay (£11.76)

**6,000**

Number of imprisoned PCC members

**100** A PCC drug-war left 100 Brazilian prisoners dead in jail

\*Figures correct at the time of original publication

to the PCC, killed in prison by “coward” gangs of prison staff seeking to even the score. Eventually, as Misha Glennly describes it, the entire city of São Paulo went into lockdown.

In 2012, things reached a new nadir and the PCC once again issued a declaration of war against the São Paulo state, provocatively titled the Salve Geral (Time of Fear). The PCC's stated strategy was simple, bloody and drawn straight from the Old Testament: for every Brother killed, either in prison or outside, a policeman or prison guard would be murdered in revenge. An eye for an eye.

The result was São Paulo's worst killing spree to date – for over a month, at least one policeman was murdered every single day. The murders were targeted assassinations with Brothers killing them off-duty, in restaurants with their families, on the beach at the weekends, or arriving home from work. And so, inevitably, the cycle of violence worsened, with the murdered cops' colleagues gathering to shoot local drug dealers or criminals – whether officially PCC Brothers or not – in revenge. Dead cops, dead criminals – during the time of the well-named Salve Geral, up to a dozen people a night on one side or the other died on the streets of São Paulo. By Christmas 2012 it seemed the killing had subsided. But only perhaps because the PCC's highest echelons had taken a decision to regroup, refocus and strengthen itself.

## BUILDING A CRIMINAL EMPIRE

Brother Marcola realised that the Salve Geral war was a zero sum game; a tit-for-tat battle that ultimately got nowhere; that the PCC could not overthrow the entire Brazilian state. At least they couldn't in their current form – concentrated almost entirely in São Paulo state and relying largely on monetary donations from Brothers out of jail to finance the organisation. A new plan was needed... an expansion plan.

The first phase of the PCC's expansion strategy began shortly after the end of the 2012 Salve Geral bloodletting. They began by absorbing other, smaller prison gangs across the country and then the street drug-dealing operations

of these small gangs. This gave the PCC a nationwide organisation and better financing courtesy of the profits from narcotics sales. Rio de Janeiro was the jewel in the crown for the PCC – Brazil's largest and richest city. Where previously the PCC had had informal alliances with similar prison-originated gangs in Rio, it now sought to take them over. Rio's biggest three prison gangs – Comando Vermelho (Red Command), Amigos dos Amigos (Friends of the Friends) and Terceiro Comando (Third Command) – all eventually fell (willingly in some cases; unwillingly in others) under the PCC's total control. The PCC called a halt – on pain of death – to any factional infighting and ordered the entire operation to concentrate on selling the highly addictive and highly profitable drug crack cocaine across the country. In the so-called unpacified favela slums, the PCC and Red Command established crack factories. *The Guardian's* Latin America correspondent based in Rio, Jonathan Watts visited one crack factory and found it dismal: “...Just a few plastic chairs and

**BELOW** Weapons, body armour and a substantial amount of cash were seized by Brazilian police as the robbers fled over the border. This was still only a fraction of the total money stolen from the vault







**ABOVE** Following the attacks on police stations in São Paulo by the PCC in 2006, shock troops race towards a juvenile prison complex where a riot has broken out

tables where kids were wrapping the drugs in little packages. Lots of gang members with big guns standing around.”

By 2015 the PCC’s takeover of the prison gang system in Brazil was complete. They had no challengers, no rivals, no opponents. They were growing incredibly rich from drug dealing. Their former actions against the state protesting prison conditions or infringements of the justice system were largely forgotten and put on the backburner. The PCC no longer appeared to be a politically motivated gang and instead resembled a typical Latin American cartel operation, producing, distributing and selling drugs backed up by various other criminal enterprises and always with the threat of extreme violence.

At which point the PCC decided to go across the border into neighbouring Paraguay to pay a visit to Ciudad del Este and Prosegur’s high-security vault.

## NOT ALL THEIR OWN WAY

You might think São Paulo would have been enough for most gangs. A megalopolis of 21 million people, and an economic powerhouse, there were plenty of banks to rob; plenty of addicts to sell crack to. Paulistanos don’t like to see their flat city compared unfavourably with the more photogenic mountainous Rio. In Rio the favelas crowd the central districts; in São Paulo they are pushed to the extremities. Misha Glenny believes this geography meant the PCC could quickly control the whole city by controlling the favelas that encircled it. They’re actually quite proud of their legendary traffic snarl-ups – São Paulo really grew to greatness as the Detroit of Brazil. It’s a working class town; tough, a stronghold of the leftist Workers’ Party. But it is a city where all Brazilian politicians agree that crime is out of control –

and that crime wave is now spreading across the state, across the country and across borders, as the Prosegur heist showed.

The daring heist at Ciudad del Este told the Paraguayans something they’d been wanting to ignore for some time – the city had moved from a retail resort to a haven of dirty money, drug smuggling, arms trafficking and prostitution. The triple border is porous and easy to cross, which is ideal for smugglers and almost impossible to effectively police.

Watts believes that, at least anecdotally, gang violence is spreading across Brazil in recent months. By conquering the rival prison-based gangs of Rio and pulling off an audacious heist such as that in del Este, you’d think the PCC were invincible. But it’s a basic law of crime – wherever there is a dominant gang, there will always be another climbing up to take its place. After securing the loyalty of Rio, it was hard to see who could challenge the PCC. However, one such has stepped forward – the Comando Revolucionário Brasileiro da Criminalidade (the Brazilian Revolutionary Criminal Command), known as the CRBC. Just as the PCC was moving away from its prison origins and planning heists in Paraguay, the São Paulo-based CRBC seized the opportunity to take them on amid their home turf. The first four months of 2017 saw the eruption of a bloody war between the PCC and the CRBC: 250 related murders occurred between January and March, a 32 per cent spike over the previous three months, according to the São Paulo state Public Security Ministry. The Ministry believes that the main cause of the current murder wave is the PCC fighting back against incursions by the CRBC into their traditional homelands.

The CRBC is small – perhaps no more than a hundred members – but they are emblematic of other potential threats. The PCC has tolerated the existence of other São Paulo gangs – the Third Capital Command, the Seita





**TOP-RIGHT** In August 2006, the PCC kidnapped reporter Guilherme Portanova, forcing Globo TV to air this video of their demands

Satânica, the Cerol Fino and the Democratic Freedom Command – as long as they are subjugate to the PCC. These gangs have seen the PCC recently go to war against splinter groups in Rio comprised of former members of the Red Command not willing to offer fealty. It's the old problem of a many-fronted war – trouble in Rio, uprisings in São Paulo, troops committed to operations in Paraguay. The PCC thought it was in total control, but gun battles in the Rio and São Paulo favelas while the police kill PCC men returning from the Paraguayan borderlands tell a different story.

*The Guardian's* Watts has been told repeatedly that the Prosegur heist was explicitly designed to significantly boost the PCC's war chest so that it could prepare itself for the coming battles with its enemies and the upstart gangs challenging it across the nation. Misha Glenny concurs: "We are conceivably on the verge of a major drugs war in Rio and São Paulo. Gutted by years of chronic corruption and economic failure... The gangs are back in force with the PCC seeking to totally dominate Rio."

Perhaps the war has already started. Glenny notes, "There has been a significant spike in the homicide rate in the last year while the entire country is now engulfed in a political, economic and constitutional crisis the like of which it has never seen." At street level the outlook is also very bleak – Jonathan Watts says he regularly hears gun fights from his window in Rio: "I doubt you would hear that much shooting anywhere outside of a war zone."

**“ WHEREVER THERE IS A DOMINANT GANG, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE ANOTHER CLIMBING UP TO TAKE ITS PLACE ”**

## THE PCC STATUTE: JUSTICE AND CRACK

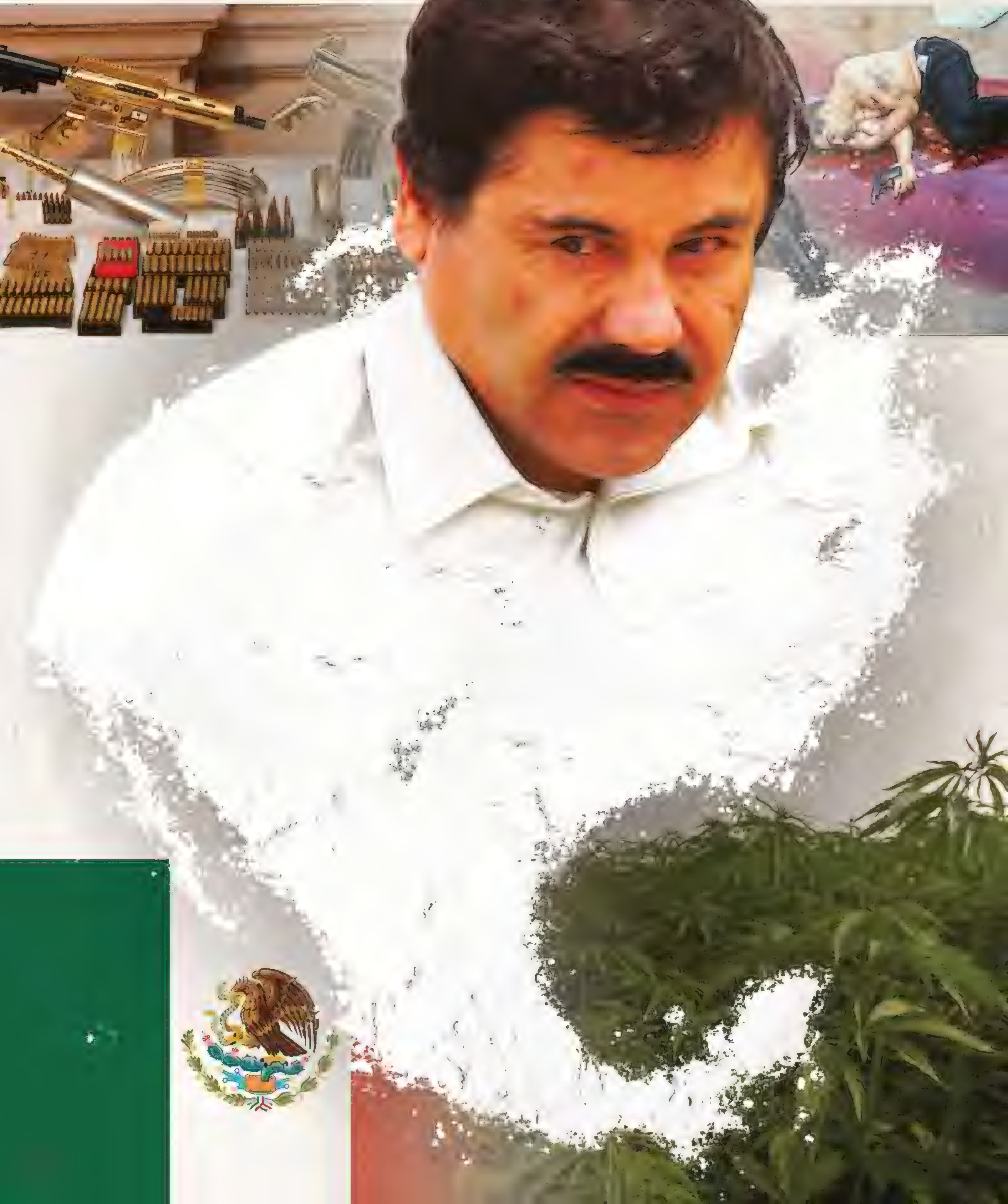
**EVERY BROTHER JOINING THE PCC MUST SIGN THE ORGANISATION'S STATUTE, BUT IT'S WAY OUT OF DATE**

There was a time back in the 1990s when the PCC was primarily concerned with injustices in the Brazilian prison system. But though that's all changed in the intervening decades, newly enrolled Brothers are still required to adhere to the PCC's 16-point Statute – the *Estatuto do Primeiro Comando da Capital* – that reads like a left-wing revolutionary manifesto.

According to the Statute, the PCC is in a constant struggle against injustice and oppression inside the prison system. The Statutes call on all Brothers to respect each other, to not feud and stick together to fight "extortion and rape" within the jails. The major motto of the PCC is "Liberty, Justice and Peace".

However, the comradely and socialistic words of the Statute contrast severely with the PCC's involvement in drug trafficking, robbery and the use of weapons. A criminal gang, just like a social movement, has to exhort unity against external enemies. Loyalty is essential in order to both do good and evil. Those who have seen their communities ravaged by PCC-trafficked crack cocaine or the peace of their favelas shattered by automatic gunfire might find the Statute of the PCC a rather ridiculous document.









# THE RISE OF EL CHAPO

THE WORLD OF THE MEXICAN DRUG CARTELS IS DEADLY AND SUPER COMPETITIVE. TO SUCCEED AS A GODFATHER, YOU NEED TO SEE YOUR CHANCE AND SEIZE IT

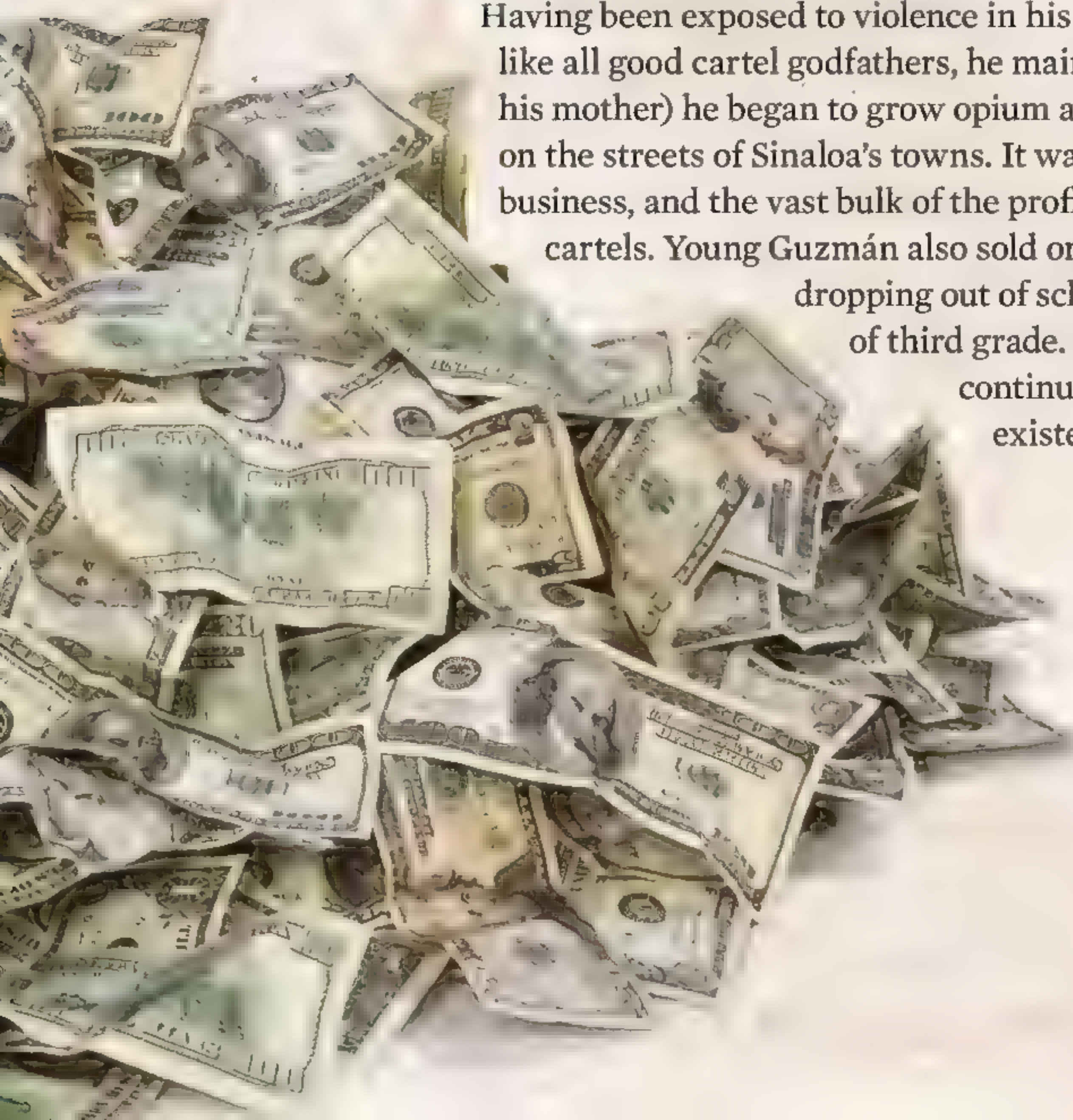
WORDS PAUL FRENCH

**J**oaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera's origins remain shrouded in some mystery. Born in the late 1950s in rural Sinaloa, Mexico, to a family of cattle ranchers that most probably really spent their time growing opium poppies, he was beaten regularly by his father and ended up running away from home.

Having been exposed to violence in his family (though like all good cartel godfathers, he maintains he loved his mother) he began to grow opium and sold marijuana on the streets of Sinaloa's towns. It was a small-time business, and the vast bulk of the profits went to the cartels. Young Guzmán also sold oranges after dropping out of school at the end of third grade. He might have continued this peripatetic existence, as so many

poor dwellers of the region do, but crucially, he had a contact – an uncle who was a pioneer in drug trafficking.

Guzmán began, with the help of some cousins, to grow and harvest his own crop of marijuana. His uncle hooked him up with the cartels and he sold it to them. With the profits, he supported his mother and sisters – his father had become a bankrupt mired in debt. But Guzmán was disciplined, worked hard, expanded his crop and attracted the attention of the local bosses of the marijuana syndicates. In the 1970s and barely in his 20s, Guzmán began working for the then-dominant Guadalajara Cartel, moving drugs from the Sierra Madre region to the US border. He was known among the cartel as 'El Chapo', Mexican slang for 'shorty', as he stood at just 1.68 metres. Anyone who thought his diminutive height meant he was somehow small in ambition or ruthlessness would soon be proved very wrong.







## RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

When El Chapo joined up with the Guadalajara Cartel, they were the new dons on the emerging Mexican drug-trafficking scene. Their key advantage was an alliance with the then-more-notorious Colombian trafficking cartels in Medellín and Cali. The Colombian Cartels had grown to become enormous operations in the 1980s. The Medellín Cartel, run by the infamous Pablo Escobar, had split when drug traffickers from the city of Cali formed their own autonomous operations. By the time El Chapo began to become involved in moving the Colombians' narcotics through Central America to Mexico and the US border, the Medellín and Cali Cartels were, according to the FBI, in control of more than 90 per cent of the world's cocaine traffic and expanding aggressively outwards from Latin America and the United States into Europe.

With the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) pressurising the Colombians' major channels through the Caribbean and the Florida corridor, they needed a secondary route. The Mexican cartels supplied it – overland through Central America, into Mexico and right up to the US border. The Guadalajarans received a fee on every kilo of cocaine they slipped past customs into the USA. The border was porous, long and undermanned; they got very rich.

The Guadalajara Cartel was run by Félix Gallardo ('El Padrino', or the Godfather) and his lieutenants, Rafael Quintero, Ernesto Carillo ('Don Neto') and Juan Jose Moreno ('El Azul', the Blue One). El Chapo worked as El Padrino's chauffeur and moved cocaine when not driving the boss. He was pushy, confident and ruthless. He constantly begged El Padrino to let him ship more coke; make more money. Gallardo noted his enthusiasm and discipline – if a smuggler delivered a shipment late, El Chapo simply shot him in the head as a warning that punctuality was important. El Padrino moved him up to head of logistics for the cartel, a vital role that ensured the organisation's profit stream and revealed every stage of the operation to the young, and eager to learn, El Chapo. The Mexicans helped the Colombians ship cocaine north by every route they could find – air, land and sea – even using submarines.

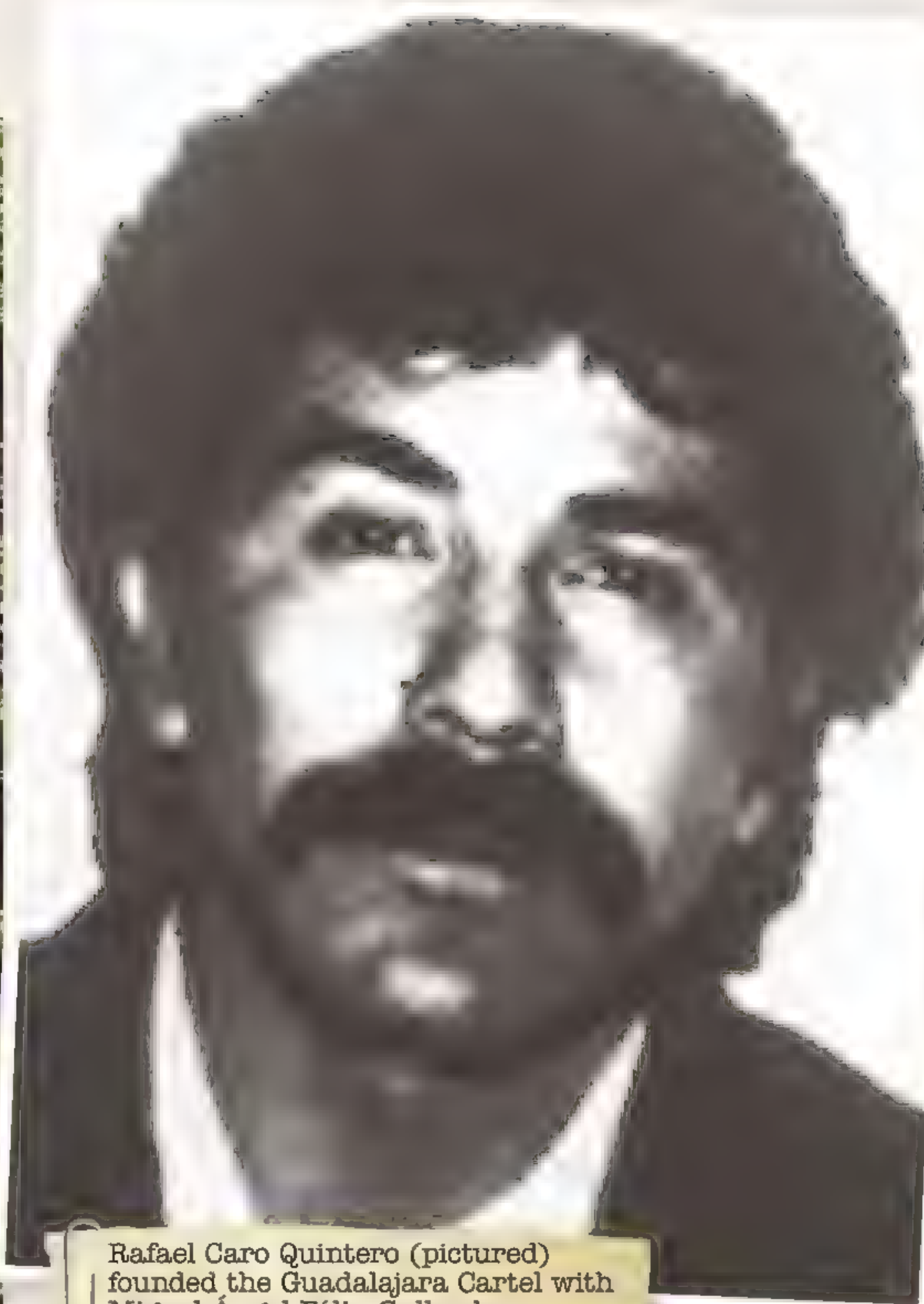
## GUADALAJARA - 'THE PEARL OF THE WEST'

By the mid-1980s, the once infamous Cali and Medellín cartels in Colombia were under extreme pressure from the DEA. With their traditional Caribbean corridor effectively shut down, the godfathers in Bogotá had little choice but to hand more and more control of their shipments into the United States to the Guadalajara, and other Mexican, cartels. Félix Gallardo's power was supreme – he controlled nearly all the dope shipments from Mexico into the United States; he bought off the Dirección Federal de Seguridad

**RIGHT** A Mexican drug control helicopter sprays Sinaloa marijuana fields with herbicides to destroy the crop







Rafael Caro Quintero (pictured) founded the Guadalajara Cartel with Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo

(DFS) – Mexico's intelligence agency – and had a string of senior Mexican police officers and judges on his payroll. He controlled the largest drug-trafficking ring in the world and the US's CIA left him alone as he channelled a percentage of his drug profits to the right-wing Contra movement in Nicaragua, then engaged in a dirty and protracted civil war against the rebel left-wing Sandinistas. Washington backed the Contras and so, by proxy, Gallardo. It was a unique situation that left Gallardo, and his associates such as El Chapo, to profit and thrive while the Colombians remained under a far tighter watch.

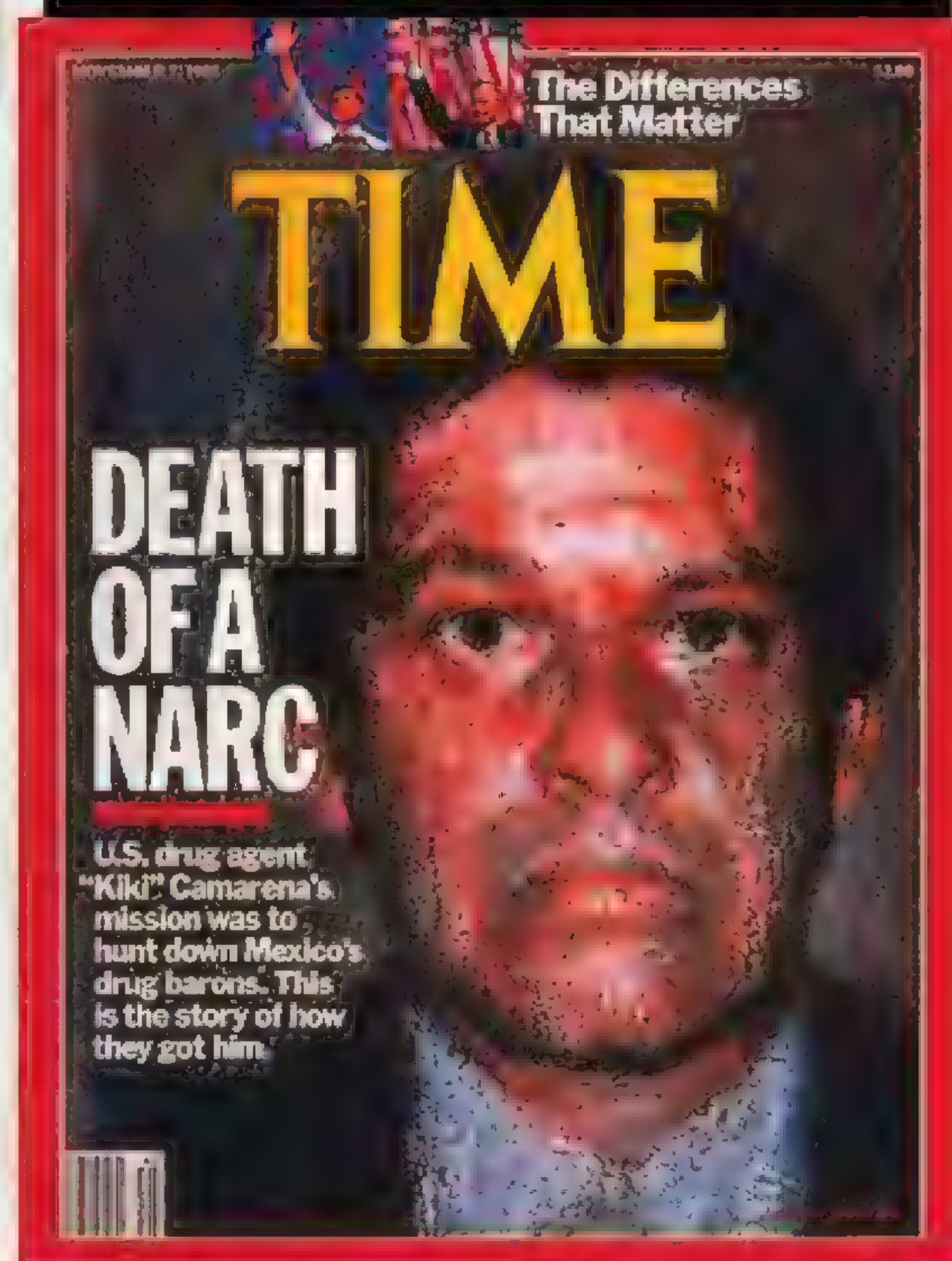
But, despite the CIA's hands-off approach, the DEA was aware of the rising power of the Mexican cartels, particularly in Guadalajara, and was determined to infiltrate and eventually destroy them. They began a concerted effort to penetrate and unmask the Mexican cartels using undercover agents – often Mexican-Americans – to join the cartels under deep cover. Their co-ordinated efforts to achieve this set in motion a sequence of events that would see El Chapo rise from trafficker and chauffeur to the godfather of the Mexican cartels. A combination of the DEA and Gallardo's vicious and violent response to them gave 'Shorty' his shot at greatness.

Guadalajara is a bright, festive city – popular with tourists, its university and cathedral are architectural treasures. The city is the home of mariachi, famed for its poets and writers, and its spicy food. Guadalajara is known in Mexico as the 'Pearl of the West'. In the 1980s, it became home to the Guadalajara Cartel, which by this time had swelled its ranks by absorbing the Sinaloa drug producers. The efforts of the DEA in Mexico came quickly to centre on Guadalajara – James Kuykendall, the head of the Guadalajara office of the DEA, told the BBC: "In 1985, Guadalajara was the base of operations for most of the major narcotics traffickers in North America." Kuykendall freely admitted that their power had grown exponentially and

## JESUS OF THE DEA

THE KILLING OF KIKI CAMARENA WAS BRUTAL, VICIOUS AND PROLONGED. IT WAS MEANT TO SEND A MESSAGE; IT PROVOKED A MASSIVE RESPONSE

When the Guadalajara Cartel took its revenge for the DEA destruction of a billion-dollar cannabis crop, it was horrific. Undercover agent Kiki Camarena was kidnapped on 7 February 1985. He was taken in broad daylight by corrupt police officers on the payroll of El Padrino. According to information obtained by *Washington Times* reporter Jerry Seper, Camarena was tortured for more than 30 hours at Gallardo's ranch. His head, face and throat were smashed and ribs broken. A hole was drilled into his head with a screwdriver. Throughout his ordeal, a cartel doctor kept Camarena conscious by constant injections of amphetamines and other drugs to stop him passing out, before he was murdered and dumped. But the US hit back hard with multi-agency crackdown on the cartel.



“ THE SHORT MAN FROM THE RURAL COUNTRYSIDE OF SINALOA WOULD BECOME THE NEW GODFATHER OF THE MEXICAN CARTELS AND AMERICA'S MOST WANTED ”





# "EL PATRON" PABLO EMILIO ESCOBAR GAVIRIA

# 10,000

ASSASSINATIONS

Escobar's high body count is boosted by the protracted "war" his Medellín Cartel fought with the rival Cali Cartel as well as the bounty payments he offered to hit men who killed police – 600 Colombian police officers were killed as a result of this policy.



The Medellín Cartel primarily supplied the booming United States' cocaine market of the 1980s and 1990s. This was largely due to their contacts throughout the Caribbean and Florida, and later via Mexico. Through other contacts in Spain, they began to export cocaine into the European Union countries.

# PROFITS \$25 BILLION

Estimating a drug baron's fortune is never a precise science – perhaps Escobar's fortune went as high as \$30 billion. No matter – all estimates are sky high and incredible – but then the man did have his own private zoo and a seriously expensive collection of art.

# TOYS

Escobar loved to spend and loved expensive toys. He was the owner of Medellín's Atlético Nacional football team, a zoo, four hotels, a tropical park, a \$70,000 gold Rolex and the world's largest collection of Colombian art.

# PRIMARY PRODUCT COCAINE

Escobar's Medellín Cartel was the exclusive producer of cocaine and Escobar became known as 'The King of Cocaine'. As demand, and the price of, cocaine soared in the United States, he had no need to diversify.

# HONORIFICS 8+

Pablo Escobar is far and away the most lauded drug dealer in terms of aliases – Don Pablo, El Mágico (The Magician), El Padrino (The Godfather), El Patrón (The Boss), El Pablito (little Pablo), El Señor (The Lord), El vergias and El Zar de la Cocaína (The Tsar of Cocaine)

# 7 CONVICTIONS

Escobar was convicted of a total of seven crimes – drug trafficking and smuggling, assassination, bombing, bribery, racketeering, rape, and molestation.

# YEARS ACTIVE

1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1991 1990 1992 1993 1994 1995

**PABLO ESCOBAR – 1976-93**

For a full 17 years, Pablo Escobar ruled the Colombian roost. After a rooftop chase in Medellín, Escobar was shot dead by Colombian National Police.





# 3,000

ASSASSINATIONS

El Chapo became infamous for executing smugglers who were late or stole from him. His assassination count was also boosted by a long-running deadly series of vendettas with the family of Arellano Felix, the boss of the rival Tijuana Cartel.

## “EL CHAPO” JOAQUIN GUZMAN LOERA



PRIMARY PRODUCT

### COCAINE, MARIJUANA, HEROINE & AMPHETAMINES

El Chapo and the former Guadalajara Cartel were always a diversified operation due to control of large marijuana plantations such as Rancho Búfalo. El Chapo's Sinaloa heartland was also a major opium poppy production base. In more recent years, the cartel has moved into methamphetamine production too.



MARKETS

### UNITED STATES, EUROPE & ASIA

The Guadalajara Cartel began exporting to Europe early on to reduce reliance on the Colombian-controlled routes and market of the USA. They also quickly diversified from cocaine and marijuana to exporting methamphetamine and MDMA (Ecstasy) to Europe. MDMA has also been shipped to Southeast Asia, sometimes in return for Asian heroin.

PROFITS

### US \$1.15 BILLION



Perhaps he never reached the heights of Escobar's fortune, but then Pablo had the days of super-high cocaine prices in the USA to bank. Still, El Chapo reigned for longer, leading Forbes magazine to crown him the “biggest drug lord of all time”.

# 2

HONORIFICS

Joaquín Guzmán is arguably the more successful of the two drug lords – and he's still alive – but he's only ever known as El Chapo or The Last Godfather.

# 5

CONVICTIONS

El Chapo has been convicted of murder, money laundering, drug trafficking, use of firearms, and smuggling and organised crime.

1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019

After the fallout from the murder of Kiki Camarena, El Chapo ran the Mexican drug business for a quarter of a century until his arrest and imprisonment in 2014. Escapes and recaptures have followed, and today El Chapo is serving a life sentence in a US maximum security prison.

EL CHAPO — 1989-2019





that they seemed apparently beyond the reach of the law. “If they didn’t have full immunity,” he said, “certainly no one was messing with them down there.” Gallardo’s envelopes stuffed full of cash, and promises of retribution on anyone who crossed him, had ensured their protection.

The DEA began undercover operations, attempts to infiltrate agents within, or at least close to, the key operatives of the Guadalajara Cartel. The most successful of these agents was 37-year-old Enrique ‘Kiki’ Camarena. Kiki was not perhaps the most obvious choice for an undercover agent – although he was Mexican-born, he had moved north, served with the US Marine Corps, spent time as a firefighter and police officer and was married with three young children. He posed as a potential drugs buyer to try to get close to the cartel’s operations. He was amazingly successful, even getting to meet El Padrino and being taken into his trust. Everything that he heard he relayed back to Kuykendall, who pushed the button to launch a major strike at the heart of the Guadalajara Cartel’s operations – a strike that had major implications for the future trajectories of El Padrino and El Chapo, but in very different directions.

In November 1984, the Mexican military – acting on the intelligence information provided to Kuykendall by Kiki – raided the Guadalajara Cartel’s largest marijuana plantation, which was known as ‘Rancho Búfalo’. Gallardo understood immediately that he had been betrayed, realised there were DEA agents close to his organisation and ordered a massive and bloody retaliation. Rancho Búfalo was strategically vital to the Guadalajara Cartel’s substantial marijuana smuggling operations – a 220-acre ranch owned by El Padrino’s closest cartel partner Rafael Caro Quintero. The Mexican newspapers at the time claimed that the Mexican authorities torched more than 10,000 tons of marijuana worth about \$160 million at Rancho Búfalo. It was a major hit on the Guadalajara Cartel’s profits. Gallardo was furious, and it didn’t take long for him to strike back.

Corrupt Mexican police officers told Gallardo that Kiki Camarena was the source, and that he was a deep-cover DEA plant in the cartel. Gallardo ordered him kidnapped and, on the fateful day of 7 February 1985, Kiki left Guadalajara’s DEA offices to meet his wife for lunch. He was stopped on the street, in broad daylight, bundled into a car and never seen alive again.

## TAKING DOWN A CARTEL

The horrific prolonged torture and murder of Kiki Camarena – soon to be dubbed the ‘Jesus of the DEA’ – as well as of a Mexican pilot for the DEA, Alfredo Zavala Avelar, who went missing the same day, could not be tolerated by Kuykendall. The American response was



El Chapo at La Palma prison in Almoloya of Juarez in 1993

massive and multi-agency – following Kiki’s disappearance, the DEA launched a giant manhunt for Camarena; US Customs completely closed the border with Mexico and the Reagan administration pressured Mexico City to act swiftly too. 30 days later, the hunt for Camarena became a homicide investigation after Kiki’s mutilated and tortured body was found dumped by a roadside.

The DEA dubbed their hunt for Camarena’s killers Operation Leyenda, which led to the arrest of the three major kingpins of the Guadalajara Cartel – Gallardo, Quintero and Ernesto ‘Don Neto’ Fonseca. Don Neto, who had long been involved in drug trafficking through Ecuador into Mexico, was arrested at the luxurious Mexican resort city of Puerto Vallarta within a month – the DEA had been looking for him since 1982 in a related case involving a massive money laundering operation for the Guadalajara Cartel that Don Neto had established in San Diego. Quintero, who had been the head of the Sonora Cartel that merged with the Guadalajara Cartel, was arrested shortly afterwards in a rainforest-shrouded hideout in Costa Rica. But it took until 1989 to catch Gallardo – rumours still swirl around his long-lived run for freedom and the possible protections offered to him during that time by senior members of Mexico’s government and law enforcement agencies. Certainly Gallardo was, at one time, considered an ‘asset’ by the CIA for

ABOVE Officers from the DEA burn any cocaine that they seize in a ceremonial process







his 'donations' to the Contras and may have been granted some level of immunity by the agency. However, the brutal killing of Kiki Camarena was a step too far and ended any relationship he may, or may not, have had with American intelligence. The DEA also snared Humberto Álvarez Machaín, the doctor who had kept Kiki Camarena conscious throughout his long torture sessions.

Gallardo was sentenced to 40 years in Altiplano (where he resides today); Quintero was also sentenced to 40 years but was released in 2013 after a court found there had been trial irregularities – he is currently on the run from a Mexican federal court warrant; Don Neto also received 40 years and remains in a Mexican maximum-security prison.

El Chapo was never arrested – he remained free, and realised that his time to step up had come.

### EL CHAPO'S TIME ARRIVES

The destruction of the Guadalajara Cartel, with its leaders in prison, awaiting extradition or on the run and unable to maintain their power, meant a splintering of the organisation. Reorganising the remaining operations and forces, reopening the trafficking routes into the United States and reinstituting business would be the task El Chapo set himself. In achieving it, the short man from the rural countryside of Sinaloa would become the new godfather of the Mexican cartels and America's Most Wanted.

The fracturing of the Guadalajara Cartel meant rivals rose up – particularly the Tijuana Cartel, controlled by the Arellano Félix brothers, and the Juarez Cartel, which was run by the Fuentes family. With Gallardo in jail, the Sinaloa Cartel now reorganised with El Chapo as the godfather. El Chapo based himself for a time in Agua Prieta, the former heartlands of the Sonora Cartel. Guadalajara was simply now too hot as a base following the blowback from the killing of Camarena.

Agua Prieta stands right on the border with the US, directly opposite the town of Douglas, Arizona. Naturally, El Chapo was able to oversee the transshipment of narcotics across the border into the USA from this location. Finding him became problematic – with the profits from the drugs business, El Chapo bought literally dozens of properties across Sonora, Sinaloa and Guadalajara, registering them in different names and never staying more than a night or two at any of the properties.

As fast as the DEA and Mexican authorities could track down these addresses he bought more properties – apartments, ranches, remote houses – and the game of cat

**TOP** In 1987, workers push cocaine in wheelbarrows to be burned as part of the 'Contra El Narcotráfico' programme.

**ABOVE** After a drug bust and shoot out, a US Border Patrolman attends to a wounded suspect who had attempted to smuggle drugs into the country from Mexico.

**“ EL CHAPO RECRUITED ALL THE LOCAL OPIUM AND MARIJUANA FARMERS TO GROW FOR HIM, EXCLUSIVELY ”**





Potential associates of El Chapo lie dead after a raid by the Navy of Mexico in which he was recaptured



**ABOVE** Cocaine is often branded to distinguish between cartels and manufacturers

and mouse continued. El Chapo always seemed to be at least one step ahead of the police.

With the dominance of the Guadalajara Cartel broken, it was only a matter of time before the rival cartels clashed. El Chapo put his business head on and secured his operations – he continued to acquire a staggering number of remote ranches and urban stash houses to protect his production and distribution networks. In his home district of Sinaloa, as well as in Durango, Chihuahua, and Sonora, El Chapo recruited all the local opium and marijuana farmers to grow for him, exclusively.

His only rivals were the Tijuana Cartel, headed by the Felix brothers. Inevitably and eventually the cartels clashed for total dominance. In 1989, El Chapo sent his most trusted lieutenant Armando López (alias ‘El Rayo’) to talk to the Felix brothers. The Tijuana Cartel murdered El Rayo, dumped his body by the roadside and ordered hits

on all his family members to prevent retaliation. Things escalated – the Tijuana Cartel kidnapped six of El Chapo’s men, tortured them and then shot them all in the back of the head. El Chapo responded and an inter-cartel war of staggering tit-for-tat violence followed – beheadings, shootings, even a senior archbishop was murdered in the crossfire. The death of a prominent churchman brought the full weight of public opinion and the Mexican media down against the Felix brothers. The Mexican state authorities launched a serious manhunt for them. They went on the run, remaining at large for years with simmering violence and murders lasting into the early 2000s. However, with the focus of law enforcement on the Tijuana Cartel, El Chapo was able to concentrate on expanding his trafficking operations and dominating the Mexican drugs business.

El Chapo was now the biggest boss in Mexico. He was shipping the most cocaine and marijuana into the USA – overland and by plane. He explored expansion plans into Europe by contacting gangs in Spain; Spain’s National Police (Policía Nacional) arrested El Chapo-linked drug dealers in the Spanish port of Algeciras who were bringing Sinaloa Cartel-linked drugs to Europe from Brazil via cargo ships. The Algeciras crackdown, an extension of the FBI’s

**“ EL CHAPO WAS SWIFTLY GOING GLOBAL. HIS POWER WAS IMMENSE; HIS WEALTH SHOT INTO THE STRATOSPHERE ”**

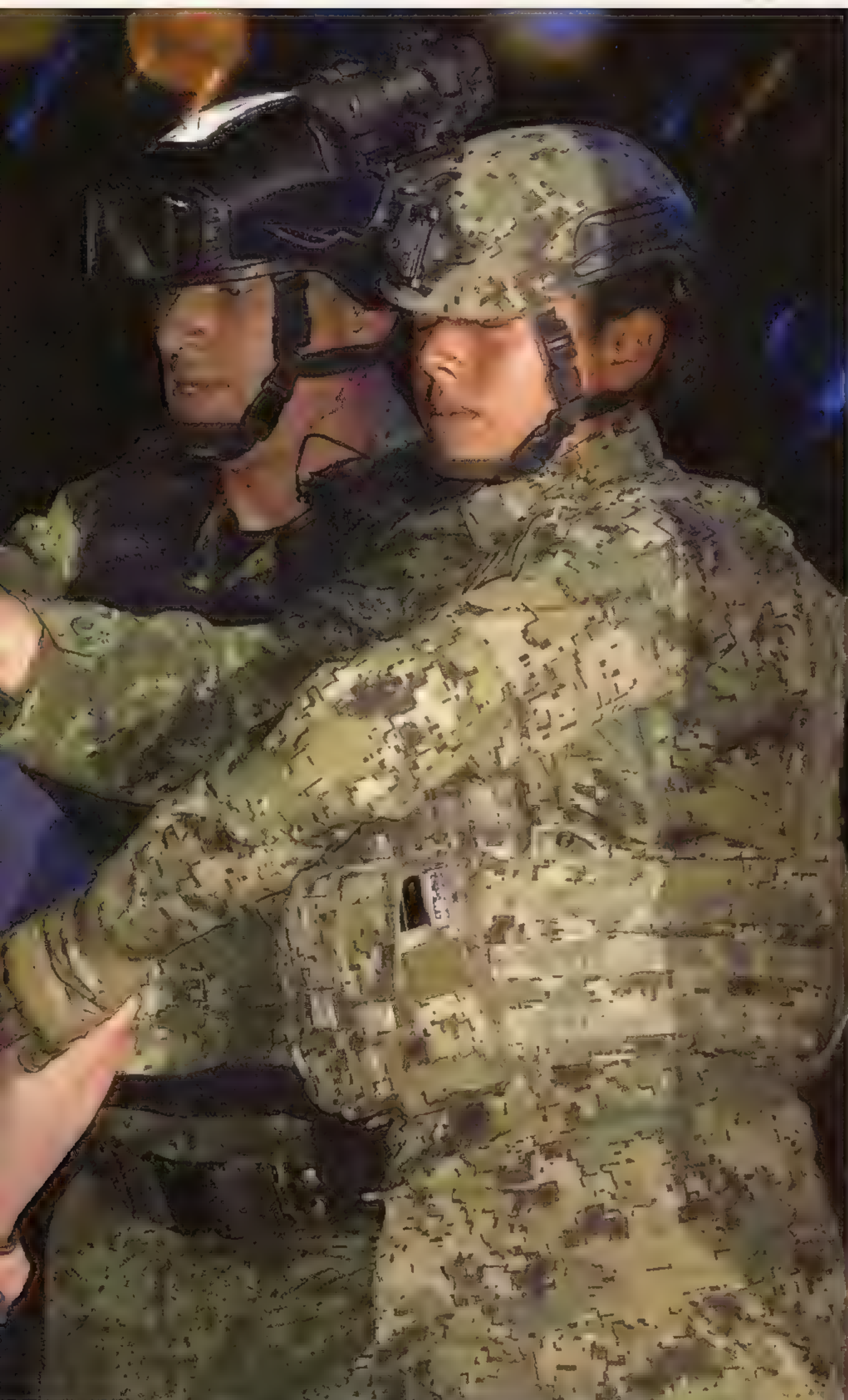




# MEXICO IS THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD

## COCAINE'S MARKUP MAKES IT BIG BUSINESS FOR EL CHAPO

El Chapo's stronghold of Mexico is now the centre of the world's drug trade. Ideally situated to facilitate the shipment of drugs from Colombia, Bolivia and Central America into the biggest market on Earth, the USA is ideally positioned to reach across the Atlantic to Europe (primarily via Spain) and into West Africa. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) believes that most cocaine enters Africa from South America making landfall around Guinea-Bissau in the north and Ghana in the south. Europe is now a major market for Mexican drugs – Europol has reported an increased presence of the Sinaloa Cartel in Spain and open war between Colombian and Mexican traffickers for control of the EU's narcotic markets.



**ABOVE** After his recapture in January 2016, soldiers escort El Chapo to the hangar of the Attorney General's Office in Mexico City

'Operation Dark Waters' against El Chapo's organisation, saw further arrests in several Spanish cities including Madrid. El Chapo was looking to exploit the emerging lucrative market for cocaine in West Africa. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* uncovered evidence of Sinaloa Cartel-linked drugs arriving by plane in Guinea-Bissau or alternatively by a northern land route from Spain and across to Senegal, Mauritania, Sahara and Eastern Morocco. El Chapo was swiftly going global. His power was immense; his wealth shot into the stratosphere.

Drug barons can never rest on their laurels. However many corrupt politicians and cops you pay off (and El Chapo was not an ungenerous man – pay-offs in the region of \$10 million were apparently not uncommon to senior police and politicians) there will always be a few honest ones to stand up and fight; the DEA and the United States' War on Drugs continued. But it was to be internal rivalries that caused El Chapo most headaches throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century – the long-simmering and never quite concluded wars with the Tijuana and other local Mexican cartels. But that's another story. By the dawn of the 1990s, El Chapo was indisputably the richest, most powerful and most feared of Mexico's drug lords.

## THE TWIST IN THE TALE

El Chapo's rise to greatness was the direct result of the intelligence work of Kiki Camarena, his subsequent brutal murder and the DEA's manhunt for those responsible. That manhunt removed most of the major kingpins in the Guadalajara Cartel and left El Chapo free to reorganise and rise to supremacy. Yet his name was never mentioned at the time as associated with the killing. However, now it is.

In January 2016, the DEA announced that it has witnesses who can place El Chapo as being involved directly in the murder of Kiki Camarena in 1985. Hector Berrellez, a former DEA special agent who was involved in the original manhunt for the killers, told the *Mexican Daily Review* in 2016 that El Chapo may well now face another murder charge in the United States – that of Kiki Camarena. Despite seeing Guzmán receive a life sentence in the US in 2019, the DEA, Camarena's family, the Sinaloa Cartel and perhaps even El Chapo himself, may see a certain irony if he were to be finally convicted of the murder that originally sparked the series of events that gave him his shot at being the Last Godfather.





# THE SINALOA CARTEL

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANISATION, THE SINALOA CARTEL, AND HOW IT HAS TURNED MEXICO INTO A WAR ZONE

WORDS DAVID HUTT

In the early hours of 4 May 2012, nine bloodied and beaten corpses were dragged onto an overpass in Nuevo Laredo, a small Mexican city on the border with the United States. Five were males, four females. Ropes were tied around their necks and then they were thrown off. A banner hung next to the dangling bodies with words printed in bold, black ink: "This is how I will finish all the fools you send."

A few hours later, 14 decapitated bodies were found inside a minivan parked outside Nuevo Laredo's city hall. They had been stuffed into black plastic bags along with their severed heads, an act believed to be revenge for the earlier slayings committed by a rival gang. Another message was found: "Continue to deny my presence here in Nuevo Laredo and you will continue to see [more] heads." It was signed by Joaquín Guzmán Loera – a five-foot-six, broad-shouldered mobster nicknamed 'El Chapo' (the Shorty) by his associates and dubbed the most powerful drug trafficker in the world by the US government.

Prior to his imprisonment in 2019, Joaquín Guzmán had been the head of the Sinaloa Cartel for over 20 years. *Forbes* magazine ranked him as the 55th richest person in the world in 2011, the Chicago Crime Commission named him 'Public Enemy Number One' and the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) believes he exceeded the influence once held by the godfather of narcotraffickers, Pablo Escobar.

Under his control, the Sinaloa Cartel became the world's most powerful drug trafficking organisation, making an estimated \$3 billion each year by moving cocaine, heroin and crystal meth north of the Rio Grande. 25 per cent of the drugs that enter the US from Mexico come from this criminal organisation. With the assistance of Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada, Joaquín Guzmán's right-hand man, the cartel now has a presence in almost 20 Mexican states, distribution cells throughout the US and has even stretched its tentacles into Europe, South America, Asia and Africa. The Sinaloa Cartel has become a truly international criminal enterprise. It has also turned Mexico into a war zone.

The Sierra Madre Occidental is a 923-mile stretch of untamed, curvaceous mountains, dense with oak trees and

steep, jagged cliffs, which run along the western edge of Mexico. It was in the Sierra's foothills, in the states of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua – an area now known as the Golden Triangle – where Mexico's narcotics history began. However, it didn't start with Mexicans themselves.

In the 1860s, Chinese immigrants arrived in western Mexico to work on railroads and in mines. Along with their industriousness, they also brought poppy seeds. Opium dens soon sprang up and junk-craving Americans travelled across the border to smoke the thick, black gum-like substance. Soon, entrepreneurial Chinese immigrants and their children, with names like Patricio Hong and Felipe Wong, began to illegally smuggle opium into the USA.

As the ill-fated Prohibition era came about, Mexicans also grew fat by moving booze north of the Rio Grande. However, when Prohibition came to an end and bootlegging profits dried up, Mexican natives grew jealous of the Chinese-controlled opium trade. So they moved in. Chinese businesses were expropriated or the smugglers were simply killed. It wasn't long before the Mexicans were in control of the opium trade, but it was still a cottage industry.

Come the 1960s and the 'hippy' movement in the USA, Mexicans discovered another of their agronomic assets could also bring in a tidy buck. Shipping marijuana north of the border became an even bigger industry for Mexican traffickers than opium, worth millions of dollars; the billions wouldn't come for another two decades.

As the 1970s and 1980s rolled around, small-scale Mexican smugglers watched as Colombians began to take the limelight. In 1981, *Time* magazine called cocaine the "All-American Drug", and it made Pablo Escobar and the country's other capos rich and famous.

It was this rise of the Colombian cartels that gave birth to the Mexican cartels. The Colombians learned during the 1980s that they didn't need to risk shipping cocaine all the

**RIGHT** Police arrest cartel members distributing cocaine, pills and marijuana in Tepito, Mexico City, a neighbourhood known to be a hub for narcotics activities

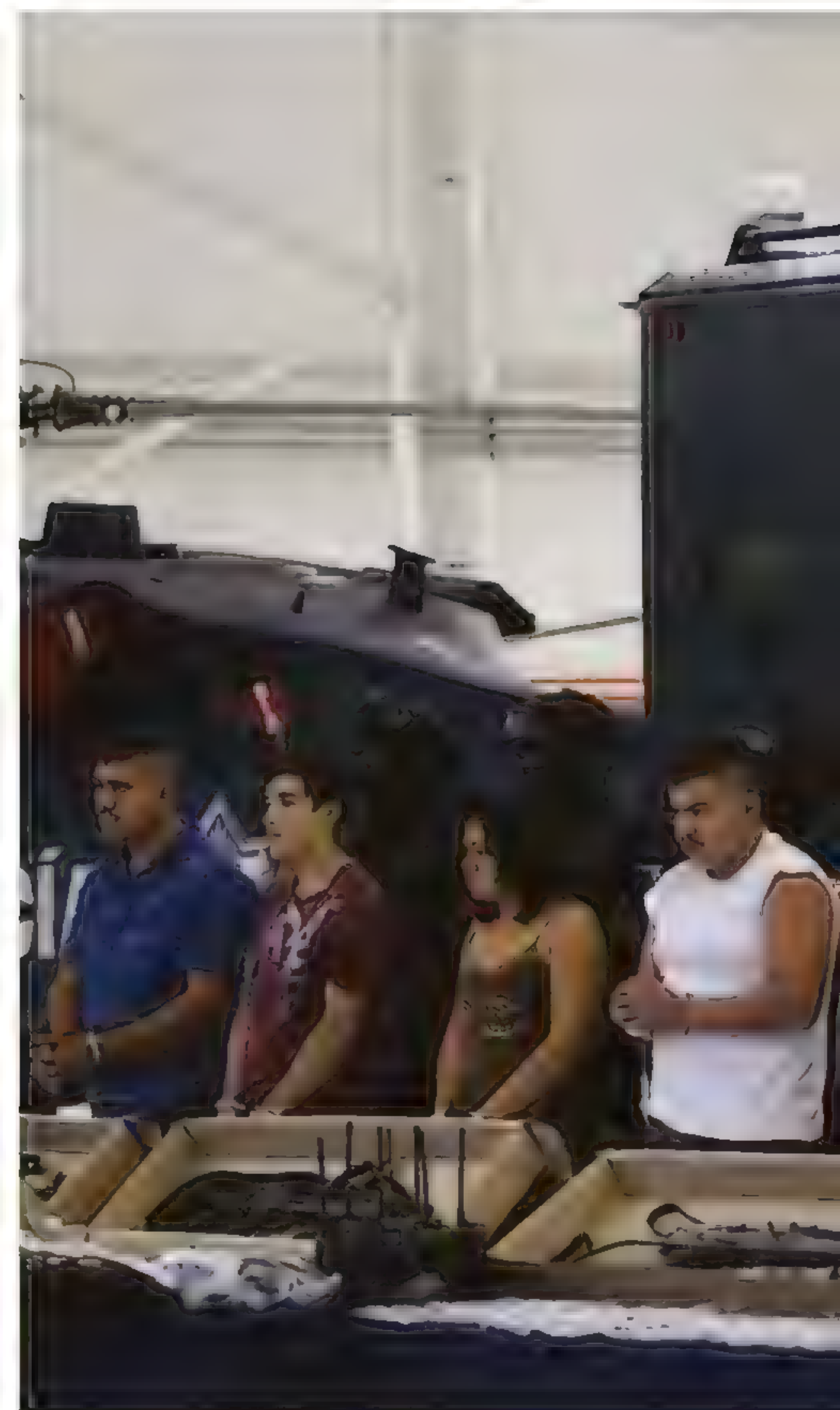




**“ IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE  
THE MEXICANS WERE IN  
CONTROL OF THE OPIUM  
TRADE, BUT IT WAS STILL A  
COTTAGE INDUSTRY ”**







**ABOVE** El Chapo was sentenced to life plus 30 years in 2019. He's currently held in a maximum security prison in the US

**TOP** A 'sicario' who has been shot dead after a clash with members of Mexican Navy in an apartment complex in Cuernavaca, where Arturo Beltran Leyva and members of his Sinaloa Cartel were killed

**TOP RIGHT** Nine Sinaloa Cartel members are paraded before the press in Mexico City

way into the USA when they could use Mexicans as the carriers, employing their century-old experience of smuggling contraband northwards.

Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo was one of the first Mexican smugglers to work together with the Colombian cartels. Born in the Culiacán, Sinaloa, in the late 1940s, he is today known as 'El Padrino' (the Godfather) – the boss of the bosses. In the 1980s, there were no real cartels in the country, only loose bands of smugglers, until Félix Gallardo co-founded the Guadalajara Cartel with Rafael Caro Quintero. With Colombian cocaine flowing through Mexico, the Guadalajara Cartel began making billions of dollars. Then, as Colombian armed forces pummelled the country's cartels, the Mexicans began buying from source.

With the demise of the Colombians, their Mexican counterparts flourished. However, when Félix Gallardo was arrested in 1989 for the murder of a DEA agent, the dominant Guadalajara Cartel dissolved. From his prison cell, he ordered the country's top capos to meet in the tranquil seaside city of Acapulco to designate which plazas (territories) each would control. The city of Juárez went to Amado Carrillo Fuentes, whose organisation became known as the Juárez Cartel; Miguel Caro Quintero got the Sonora corridor, forming the Sonora Cartel (later to become the Tijuana Cartel); Juan García Ábrego kept Tamaulipas state,

creating the Gulf Cartel; and the now-infamous Joaquín Guzmán and Ismael Zambada took the Golden Triangle states, forming the Sinaloa Cartel.

Félix Gallardo hoped such an accord would maintain peace for years to come. It didn't.

It is often said that things were better in the past. This appears to be true in Mexico's drug war. When Félix Gallardo and his Guadalajara Cartel were in charge, some civilians were killed, women raped and innocents suffered. However, it was nothing like today. "Never in the history of Mexican drug trafficking could someone like Félix Gallardo operate again. He was a man of his word, of deals before shots, of convincing arguments before executions," wrote Jesus Blancornelas, one of the finest Mexican journalists, who bravely reported on the cartels when others wouldn't, in his book *El Cartel*.

Today, many Mexican journalists no longer write about the crimes committed by the cartels. This is either out of fear for their lives and the lives of their family, or because the news of beheadings, massacres and levels of barbarity are no longer out of the ordinary.

According to the UN, between 2007 and 2014, the number of civilians killed in both Afghanistan and Iraq is estimated at almost 103,000. In June 2015, the Mexican government released a report that estimated within the same seven-year period more than 164,000 people were murdered. Of course, not all were cartel related, but the government believes that a vast majority were.

In June 2011, mass graves containing 193 murdered people were found in the municipality of San Fernando. According to media reports, female victims had been gang-raped and able-bodied males had been forced to fight each other to

**“ WITH COLOMBIAN COCAINE FLOWING THROUGH MEXICO, THE GUADALAJARA CARTEL BEGAN MAKING BILLIONS OF DOLLARS ”**





the death. All were subsequently killed. A few months later, mass graves were also found outside the city of Durango, containing the remains of 340 people, many of them civilians. In the years that followed, severed heads were thrown into busy nightclubs, cartel-produced snuff videos became ever-present on the internet and grenades exploded as ordinary Mexicans celebrated national festivities. Then, in September 2014, the kidnapping of 43 students from a college in Iguala, southwest Mexico, sparked an international scandal, with protests erupting across the world, forcing the drug war under the global spotlight.

How did things get so bad? How did the conflict escalate to a full-scale insurgency? It's commonly assumed that the Mexican Drug War began in 2006, when Felipe Calderon was elected president and unleashed a full-blown attack on the country's drug industry, sending thousands of police and soldiers to fight the cartels head on. But for others, like journalist Ioan Grillo, author of the acclaimed book *El Narco*, to understand Mexico's modern drug war, we need to look further back in time.

By 1997, a psychopathic mobster named Osiel Cardenas had murdered his way to the top of the Gulf Cartel, often by killing his allies – he didn't earn the nickname 'Mata Amigos' (friend killer) for nothing. Around the same time, Cardenas came into contact with a man who would change the drug war forever: Arturo Guzmán Decena. A Mexican Army Special Forces commander, trained by the US army and Israeli Defence Forces, and tasked with eradicating the cartels, Arturo Guzmán had long been on the payroll of the Gulf Cartel. Then, in 1997, he cut ties with the military and founded a group called Los Zetas, who were to be the enforcers of the Gulf Cartel. However, Los Zetas were no

# CARTEL WAR

TWO CARTELS HAVE BATTLED IT OUT IN MEXICO, THE OLD-GUARD SINALOA CARTEL AGAINST THE BRUTAL LOS ZETAS, DESPITE BOTH LOSING THEIR INFLUENTIAL LEADERS IN RECENT YEARS

## SINALOA

## VS

## LOS ZETAS



**FOUNDED:**  
1989

**ALLIES:**  
Gulf Cartel, Knights Templar Cartel,  
Jalisco New Generation Cartel

**TERRITORY:**  
Based in Culiacán, Sinaloa, with control over much of western Mexico, it is active in the US, Europe and as far away as Asia



**FOUNDED:**  
1997

**ALLIES:**  
Gulf Cartel,  
Banda Zetas Cartel

**TERRITORY:**  
Active in almost all states of Mexico and is said to now function in more than half of Guatemala

## THE BOSS

**Nickname** El Mayo  
**Full name** Ismael Zambada García  
**Reward** \$5 million +

**Nickname** Currently unknown  
**Full name** Currently unknown  
**Reward** \$5 million +

## TACTICS

Bribes before bullets  
Buying off police officers  
Hobnobbing with elected politicians  
Hiring hitmen

Brutal shock-and-awe tactics  
Kidnapping for ransom  
Paramilitary-style raids and shootouts  
Terrorsing enemies instead of bribes

## CRIMES

The Sinaloa Cartel deals exclusively in narcotics and money-laundering, as opposed to the numerous other rackets (including human trafficking and illegal mining and logging) that rival cartels are involved in.

Los Zetas have been responsible for some of the most violent acts of narco-terrorism in Mexico, including the San Fernando Massacres and 49 decapitated bodies that were dumped in Monterrey.





Bullet holes from a recent assassination of a police officer in Nuevo Laredo. The killing occurred during an upscale in drug war violence between the Sinaloa Cartel and the Gulf Cartel for control of the Laredo truck crossing turf



Norma Yuliana Aviles was arrested on 12 May 2011 with Martin Beltran Coronel, believed to be one of the main leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel. They were charged with organised crime, but acquitted

## “ IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON FOR THEM TO ENTER A VILLAGE AND LEAVE WITH THE ENTIRE POPULATION MASSACRED ”

mere drug runners or hitmen. Arturo Guzmán (also known as Z-1) recruited from within the ranks of the well-trained and well-equipped Mexican Special Forces. He also recruited from Guatemala, signing up former counter-insurgency soldiers from the Kaibil, who had a history of barbarity during the country's 40-year civil war. It was not uncommon for them to enter a village and leave with the entire population massacred. It was this level of savagery that Los Zetas unleashed onto the streets of Mexico.

By 2004, however, Osiel Cardenas had been arrested and Arturo Guzmán gunned down by the army. Sensing weakness, Joaquín Guzmán and the Sinaloa Cartel decided to take control of the Gulf Cartel's strongholds, starting with the border-city of Nuevo Laredo. While many believed that the months of fighting between Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas for control of the city was a mere 'turf war', it ushered in an all-new scale of conflict: paramilitary-style hit squads; cartels dressed in combat fatigues with military-grade weapons; officials murdered; mass kidnappings; massacres of civilians.

The Sinaloa Cartel greatly underestimated the upstarts. With Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano (Z-3) in charge of Los Zetas, it saw off the Sinaloas from Nuevo Laredo, later broke away from the Gulf Cartel and changed the course of Mexican history. As they ratcheted up the barbarity, other cartels were forced to emulate the atrocities. When violence between Los Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel intensified, smaller cartels could no longer remain independent.

The Mexican Drug War is now a nationwide struggle fought by three sides: the government, the Sinaloa Cartel and those informally allied to it, and Los Zetas and their associates. For example, the Sinaloa Cartel is now associated with its former enemies the Gulf Cartel, as well as the Knights Templar Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of the fastest growing in the country.

Also, the Sinaloa Cartel formed relations with lower-level criminal groups and notorious gangbangers, who are often employed to carry out atrocities. The gang Los Ántrax, for

example, routinely beheads and executes on behalf of the cartel and serves as a de facto security service for the Sinaloa capo, Ismael Zambada. The lawless Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) also carries out the dirty work of the Sinaloa Cartel, even at times outside of Mexico. In May 2014, gangsters from MS-13 were ordered to take rivals from another cartel hostage in the American city of Minneapolis. This incident raised fears in the USA that the Mexican cartels were growing in strength on the other side of the border. The most powerful gang within the California prison system, the Mexican Mafia, also has ties to Joaquín Guzmán and his associates.

Many within the Mexican police force, army and government are also in the pockets of the cartels. This is not new: Félix Gallardo's Guadalajara Cartel was largely able to function because of corruption and collusion, and it is claimed by some that he was under the protection of the CIA due to his gun-running for right-wing Nicaraguan paramilitaries the Contras during the Central American nation's civil war in the 1980s. However, at that time, drug cartels were often seen as a mere stain in the country, and not a threat to the state as they are today.

One worrying trend, is that the Sinaloa Cartel is the only pure drug-trafficking organisation left in Mexico. Other groups no longer count narcotics as their principal source of income. The Knights Templar Cartel in Michoacán state, for example, makes most of its money from illegal mining and logging. Los Zetas are said to collect only half of their revenue from drugs, the rest from kidnapping and extortion.

The implication of this is that, as the cartels move into new lines of business and as the levels of barbarity increase, they may one day pose a real threat to the Mexican state as we know it, perhaps with a militarised insurgency aimed at bringing down the government. More than 150 years have passed since the first Chinese immigrants planted opium on the slopes of the Sierra Madre Occidental, and Mexico is still to come to terms with the impact of narcotics.



# CONTROLLING THE CARTEL

HOW EL CHAPO AND HIS ASSOCIATES MANAGED A MULTI-BILLION DOLLAR NARCOTICS MACHINE

The loose hierarchy of the Sinaloa Cartel was traditionally based around two head capos, Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán and Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada. Both leaders controlled their own areas and dealings, as did lower-level crimes bosses, though money tended to work

its way up to El Chapo. The Sinaloa Cartel achieved its prominent position through alliances with other criminal organisations, the bribery of police, army and politicians, the ability to kill and kidnap if necessary and through the strong leadership of El Chapo and

El Mayo. However, following the arrest and imprisonment of Guzmán in 2019, it's believed that the Sinaloa Cartel is now headed up by Zambada and Guzmán's sons, Alfredo Guzmán Salazar and Ivan Archivaldo Salazar.

## SANDRA ÁVILA BELTRÁN (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

"La Raina del Pacífico" (Queen of the Pacific) is a former cartel boss linking Mexico to the Colombians. After serving seven years in prison, she was released in 2015.

## JOAQUIN GUZMAN (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

The infamous face of the Sinaloa Cartel is currently serving a life sentence in a maximum-security prison in the United States.

## HÉCTOR PALMA SALAZAR (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

Working his way up to boss of the Guadalajara Cartel, Salazar formed an alliance with El Chapo, before he was arrested in 1995.

## ALFREDO BELTRÁN LEYVA (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

Also known as 'El Mochomo' (the desert ant), Alfredo once worked alongside El Chapo before splintering off to form the rival Beltrán-Leyva Cartel.

## ARTURO BELTRÁN LEYVA (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

Brother to Alfredo, Arturo also once worked as a Sinaloa Cartel underboss. He was killed in a shootout with Mexican marines in 2009.

## HÉCTOR BELTRÁN LEYVA (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

The third of the four brothers, Hector ordered the murder of El Chapo's son after Alfredo's capture, suspecting their boss of treason.

## EDGAR VALDEZ VILLARREAL (COLOMBIAN CONTACT)

Villarreal was born and raised in the US and led a brutal enforcement squad known as Los Negros before his arrest in Mexico City, in 2010.

## THE BALDIES (HIT SQUAD)

Los Pelones - 'The Baldies' - were formed in reaction to Los Zetas and typically recruit armed forces deserters and former cops.

## THE BLONDIES (HIT SQUAD)

This group also deal in narcotics and have formed brief and shaky alliances with rivals Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel.

## FEDA (HIT SQUAD)

This is Arturo's personal team of assassins, a crack squad called 'Fuerzas Especiales de Arturo', or 'Special Forces of Arturo'.

## ZHENLI YE GON (AMPHETAMINE SUPPLIER)

This owner of a major pharmaceutical firm in Mexico is suspected of supplying precursor drugs.

## LOS NEGROS (PARAMILITARY FORCE)

Former military arm of the Sinaloa's that splintered off under Villarreal, before his arrest saw the gang collapse.

**“MANY WITHIN THE MEXICAN POLICE FORCE, ARMY AND GOVERNMENT ARE ALSO IN THE POCKETS OF THE CARTELS. THIS IS NOT NEW”**

## MS-13 (CONTRACTED STREET GANG)

Originated in Los Angeles but now spread across the US into Canada and Mexico, gang members are recruited by the Sinaloas.

## MEXICAN MAFIA (CONTRACTED STREET GANG)

The Sinaloa Cartel effectively franchises this US-based gang, and its members rarely know who they really work for.







# THE FLORES BROTHERS

VS

# EL CHAPO

THE FLORES BROTHERS CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF A DRUG EMPIRE AND LIVED A GLAMOROUS NARCO LIFESTYLE, BUT A BLOODTHIRSTY WAR BETWEEN CARTELS FORCED THEM TO BECOME PART OF A CASE THAT SENT DOZENS OF HIGH-RANKING CARTEL MEMBERS TO PRISON

WORDS TANITA MATTHEWS

**T**o build up a multi-million dollar drugs empire and count one of the most wanted kingpins in the world as something of a close ally, then tear it down at a moment's notice – delivering Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán to the FBI – seems a crazy state of affairs. But for twin brothers Peter and Margarito Jnr. 'Junior' Flores this was their reality.

The Flores brothers had grown from small fry in a Chicago suburb to a life of unimaginable wealth in Mexico's scenic neighbourhoods, as wholesale distributors for the country's most affluent and influential drug lords.

But in the spring of 2008 their luck ran out when a war between El Chapo and his former business partner Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada García erupted. The Flores brothers and their families found themselves in real danger. It was then that the pair made an incredible decision. They decided they would return to the United States, where they were wanted men for drug charges, and offer up El Chapo, the warring cartel bosses and their associates in the drug world. They would disband their empire and give up the lifestyle they had

formerly led, and in the process expose themselves and their families to a fate worse than mere death if the cartels caught up with them.

## SMALL BEGINNINGS

The brothers were born to Mexican immigrant parents in 1981, a time when the crack epidemic was just starting to impact the United States. Before the Flores brothers were even born their childhood was mapped out as drug kingpins. The odds of success in any other vocation were stacked against them as they grew up in Little Village, a working-class town where gangs, vice and violence were rife. Their upbringing was extremely disruptive – their father was a lucrative drug lord serving time for narcotics possession at the time of their birth. Delivered just 17 minutes apart, they were more than siblings; they were best friends and spent the majority of their time as children joined at the hip – wherever one brother was, the other was right there beside him.





When the pair were seven years old their father returned home from prison, and the Flores brothers were raised to be drug traffickers. According to Junior's wife Olivia, the boys would "put their little hands in the gas tank and pull out the drugs that their dad had smuggled across the US border to Mexico." The boys also "had to learn how to operate a triple beam scale to weigh their father's drugs, learn their multiplications to count their father's money, complete drug runs for him at the age of eight or nine years old. They were deprived of any kind of normal childhood," Olivia explained.

The seedy underbelly of Chicago was never far from their door. Their older brothers Armando and Hector were continuously in trouble for gang, gun and drug-related offences, but the twins were dissuaded by their father from joining any gangs or taking drugs themselves – something many high-ranking narco bosses consider important for a successful drug business.

Slowly building their business into an empire, the brothers adopted a similar model to that of fast food chain McDonald's, where they worked as young men. Those who worked for them only ever had one job at any given time: money counters didn't cross their job with those in charge of weighing the drugs out; every role was distinct. In Chicago the brothers had more than a dozen couriers, who were responsible for collecting up to \$1 million at a time and keeping up the appearance of normality at their multiple safe houses. It was a structure that helped their business expand to Milwaukee

in 1998. They were given their brother's contacts, including his suppliers. By that time they had proven themselves as kingpins, pulling off their first deal at the age of 17 for 30 kilograms of narcotics.

It was around this time that the pair began to crop up on law enforcement's radar. These were low-key crimes considering the pair were bringing in a healthy sum as drug lords beneath their disguises as somewhat law-abiding citizens. To avoid detection, the brothers kept one step ahead of law enforcement at all times,

## THEY HAD PROVEN THEMSELVES AS KINGPINS, PULLING OFF THEIR FIRST DEAL FOR 30 KILOS OF NARCOTICS



**ABOVE** As many as 272 audio recordings were compiled by the US government as part of their prosecution against El Chapo, including 70 secretly recorded conversations with the Flores brothers.

switching phones on a regular basis, using vehicles with sophisticated hidden compartments that would allow for a smooth pick-up, and packing drugs with floral-smelling fabric sheets to throw off sniffer dogs.

They used the drug money to set up a string of legitimate businesses as a front for their wealth. By the age of 22 they owned five houses, multiple luxury vehicles, dined in expensive restaurants and gambled in exclusive casinos in Las Vegas. But such wealth could only evoke jealousy in rivals, and in 2003 Peter was kidnapped. A Chicago drug dealer had his associates pose as police officers before pulling the young man into a van and driving off. A ransom of \$2 million was negotiated by Junior for his brother's safe return.

Despite such a tremendous loss the brothers simply picked themselves up and carried on. Their business was run in a way that meant violence was off the table, even for the kidnapper who extorted a small fortune from them. The pair remained inconspicuous until 2003, when Junior was stopped at a Milwaukee checkpoint for not wearing a seatbelt and carrying a couple of dollars of marijuana.

It was an arousal of suspicion too far, and in 2005 the Milwaukee cops had pieced together information together to construct a list of safe houses of the brothers' safe houses – each of which had up to \$7 million dollars' worth of drugs stashed away behind remote-controlled hydraulic trapdoors. By the time law enforcement had a chance to catch up with the brothers they had fled the country to Mexico, where their family lived in a remote and quiet part of San Juan. Eventually they relocated with their girlfriends to Mexico's second biggest city, Guadalajara, getting themselves lost in and among the teeming city's four million residents.

## A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

Once in Mexico the brothers focused on managing their business from afar, distributing millions of dollars' worth of drugs across state lines. The brothers forged a new life, their business was flourishing and their connections meant that they were trafficking drugs for the king of cocaine – El Chapo. But their happiness was short-lived when Peter was kidnapped again, this time by their supplier 'Uncle Pablo', a member of the Sinaloa Cartel who claimed the brothers hadn't paid up on a \$10 million debt owed to El Chapo. Junior decided to take his case to the very top, and thanks to his extensive contacts he was able to set foot in El Chapo's high-security mansion in the Sinaloa mountains and prove that they had kept up their payments.

Satisfied that the brothers had been regularly paying up, El Chapo negotiated the release of Peter. He realised the kidnapper, the brothers' former supplier, was attempting to skim money off the top of his business. He offered the brothers the chance to pull the trigger themselves on the



Authorities described Peter (left) and Junior Flores (right) as "collectively responsible for the distribution of ton quantities of cocaine and the laundering of more than \$1 billion through the course of the conspiracy"

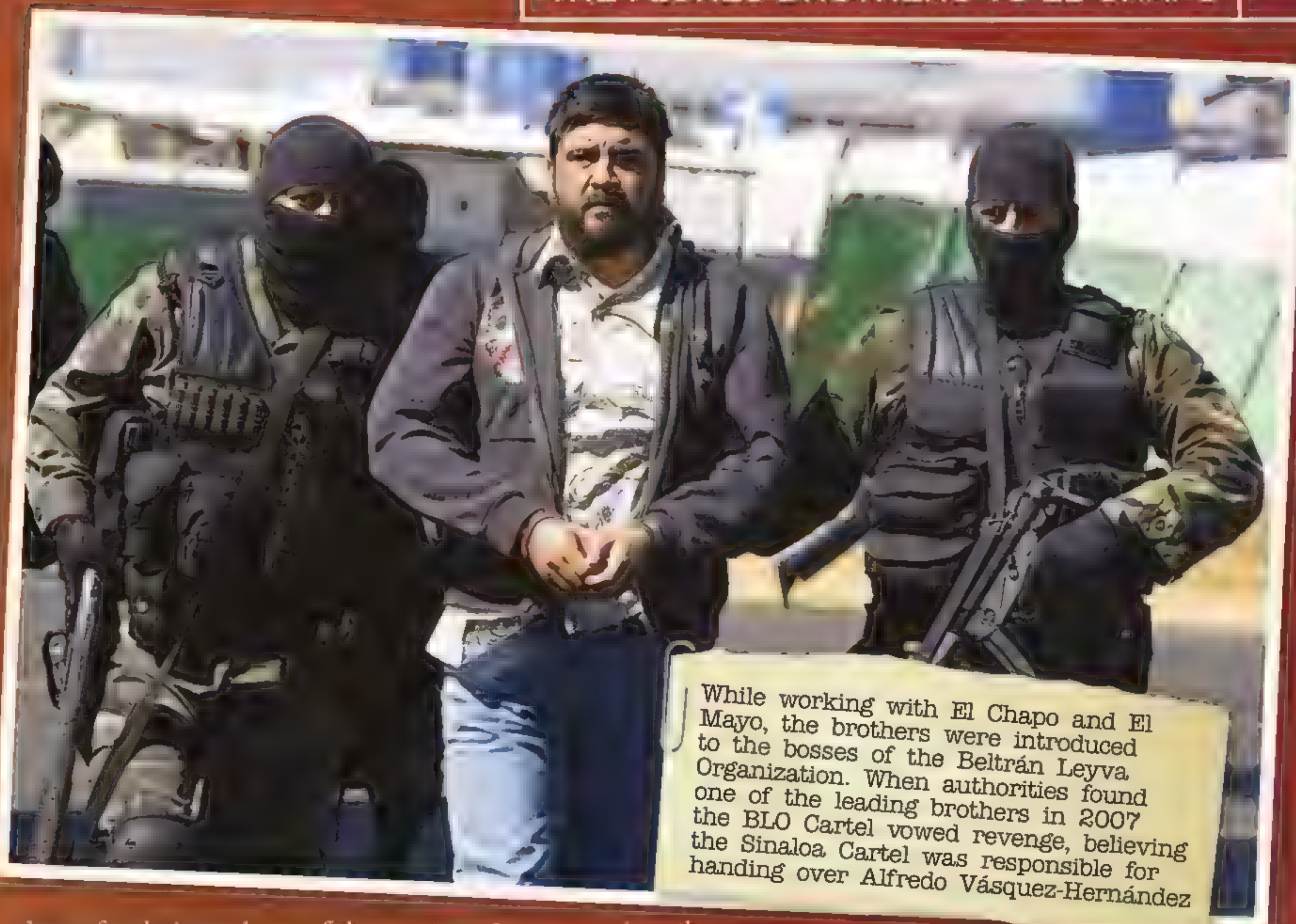


traitor but they politely declined. When Uncle Pablo's debt to El Chapo went unpaid and the supplier attempted to extort more money from the twins by kidnapping their father, El Chapo's patience ran out. After forcing him to pay up and release Margarito Flores Senior he was executed.

Having met Junior and Peter face to face El Chapo was impressed by the pair. The men were young, smart and disciplined, and he realised they were too good of an opportunity to pass up and made the brothers honorary members of his inner circle. He worked with them to distribute drugs in Chicago, New York, Washington and Los Angeles. The brothers were also approached by El Chapo's sworn enemies, the five brothers who headed the Beltrán-Leyva Organization (BLO). With so many drugs to shift across the Mexican border into the US, the brothers were raking in millions of dollars every day from the comfort of their own home as they operated their business remotely with the use of multiple 'burner' phones.

The brothers later reported how El Chapo's operations included a fleet of Boeing 747 jets that had their seats removed, packed with money, and sent out under the guise of humanitarian missions south of the American border. On their return the planes would be loaded with up to 12,000 kilograms of cocaine. El Chapo was constantly looking for new ways to shift his stash: in 2007 submarines were used as well as speedboats and amphibious vessels to avoid the law enforcement officers. Every month the Flores brothers were transporting more than \$900 million of narcotics.

Theirs was a life of luxury, which they shared with their wives and children. Their status afforded them a free rein over Mexico as they came to see how El Chapo kept law enforcement officers sweet in return for the freedom to move



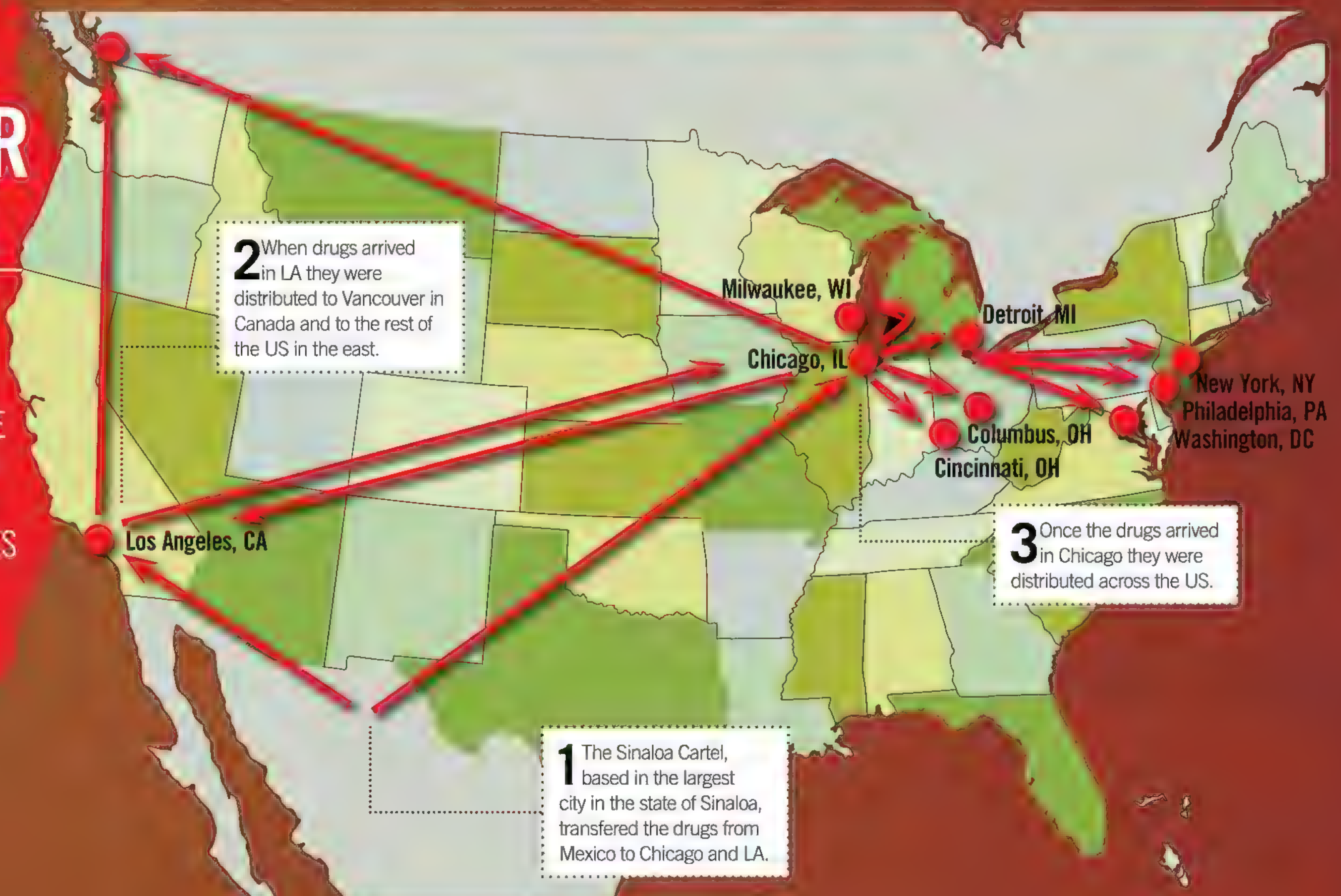
While working with El Chapo and El Mayo, the brothers were introduced to the bosses of the Beltrán Leyva Organization. When authorities found one of the leading brothers in 2007 the BLO Cartel vowed revenge, believing the Sinaloa Cartel was responsible for handing over Alfredo Vásquez-Hernández

drugs freely in and out of the country. It was not just the brothers who benefitted from the arrangement though. With the brothers working for El Chapo, the kingpin's access to the US was unprecedented. Regularly the brothers were flown out to the mountains to meet with El Chapo and his officials at secret meetings where drug lords congregated to discuss strategy. It seemed like they had the world at their feet.

But all the time the cartels were facing a backlash, and the brothers were quickly realising that the perks of the job came with a price. In December 2006 Felipe Calderón was elected president of Mexico. Within two weeks he sent 5,500 army troops to the state of Michoacán, just outside of Guadalajara.

## THE PAPER TRAIL

WITH MONEY AND DRUGS CROSSING MULTIPLE STATE LINES, THE SKY WAS THE LIMIT FOR THE FLORES BROTHERS







## WE ARE FAMILY

JUST WHERE DID THE FLORES BROTHERS FIT IN WITH THE CARTELS, AND WHO WERE THEY WORKING WITH?

**CARTEL BOSS**  
Joaquin Guzman  
'El Chapo'  
**JAILED**

**CARTEL BOSS**  
Ismael Zambada García  
'El Mayo'  
**FUGITIVE**

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Peter Flores  
'Pedro'  
**JAILED**

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Margarito Flores  
'Junior'  
**JAILED**

**EL CHAPO'S COUSIN, NARCOTICS BROKER AND LOGISTICAL COORDINATOR**  
Juan Guzman Rocha  
'Juancho'  
**DEAD**

**EL CHAPO'S SON**  
Jesus Alfredo Guzman Salazar 'Alfredillo' or 'Jags'  
**FREE**

**EL CHAPO'S SON**  
Ivan Archivaldo Guzman Salazar 'El Chapito'  
**FREE**

**EL MAYO'S SON**  
Vicente Zambada Niebla  
'El Vicentillo' or 'El Niño'  
**JAILED**

**EL MAYO'S SON**  
Ismael Zambada Imperial  
'Mayito Gordo'  
**JAILED**

**EL MAYO'S SON**  
Ismael Zambada Sicairos  
'Mayito Flaco'  
**FUGITIVE**

**EL MAYO'S SON**  
Serafin Zambada Ortiz  
**ARRESTED**  
WITNESS PROTECTION

**SENIOR MEMBER OF SINALOA CARTEL**  
Heriberto Zazueta Godoy  
'Capi Berto'  
**ARRESTED**

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND RIGHT-HAND MAN**  
Germán Magaña Pasos  
'German Olivares'  
**FUGITIVE**

**BODYGUARD FOR JESUS SALAZAR**  
Jesus Raul Beltran Leon  
'Trevol' or 'Chuy Raul'  
**JAILED**

**COCAINE LOGISTICS EXPERT AND A SUSPECTED CARTEL MONEY LAUNDERER**  
Victor Manuel Selix Beltran  
'Lic Vico'  
**FUGITIVE**

**LAUNDERER**  
Jorge Martin Torres  
**JAILED**

**LAUNDERER**  
Edgar Manuel Valencia Ortega 'Fox'  
**JAILED**

**SUPPLIER**  
Alfonso Limon Sanchez  
'Chubas'  
**FUGITIVE**

**LAUNDERER**  
Hector Miguel Valencia Ortega 'MV'  
**DEAD**

**FRIEND OF EL CHAPO**  
Alfredo Vasquez Hernandez  
**JAILED**

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Jorge Mario Valenzuela Verdugo 'Choclos'  
**DEAD**

to fight the cartels - who fought back. Within six years approximately 85,000 people died because of cartel violence. The following year El Chapo and El Mayo went to war with the Juárez Cartel over a smuggling route from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso. The death toll in Ciudad Juárez soared, reaching a record of 1,500 homicides in 2008. Despite the carnage in Mexico, Peter and Junior were still as successful as ever and began to trade the main ingredients in manufacturing meth.

## REALITY CHECK

The Flores' life of security and wealth came crashing down in 2008 when corrupt Mexican authorities kidnapped the



Arturo Beltrán Leyva, one of the founders of the Beltrán-Leyva Organization branched out from the Sinaloa Cartel following a strained relationship with El Chapo. Leyva was killed in a raid in December 2009



## “THE BROTHERS WERE TASKED WITH AN UNIMAGINAGABLE AND HIGHLY DANGEROUS UNDERCOVER OPERATION”

brothers and their wives, hauling them off in the middle of the night. It seemed like this was the end for the brothers and their families. But when word got back to El Chapo that the lives of his valuable assets were on the line he, the BLO and [3] Mavi arranged for bodyguards to rescue the hostages and the brothers and their wives escaped.

But tensions between the BLO and El Chapo were beginning to strain as the war in Mexico intensified. On 21 January 2008 Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, one of the five BLO bosses, was arrested in Culiacán. The Beltrán Leyva brothers believed that their brother's arrest was the work of Chapo and the Sinaloa Cartel. They strongly sensed that the authorities had been tipped off as to the whereabouts of their brother's hiding place. This incident quickly turned the BLO against the Sinaloa Cartel, leaving the brothers to pick a side or face being caught in the murderous crossfire.

With children and wives to think of, the brothers made a life-altering decision. Through their attorney, they reached out to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in the US. It was proposed that, despite the looming drug indictments the brothers had left behind three years ago, they would be willing to return to the US and cooperate against some of the most sought after criminals in the world. It was a move that guaranteed them no favours but that would get them away from the murderous destruction engulfing Mexico. It would mean turning their backs on their millionaire lifestyle, their homes in Mexico and the dangerous drug lords who trusted them – who would do much worse than kill them and their families if it was discovered they had even contemplated blowing the whistle.

Following a series of meetings with attorneys and DEA agents in Mexico, the brothers agreed to infiltrate the warring groups and record them in action as they negotiated the trafficking of millions of dollars' worth of cocaine and heroin. Their cooperation would likely be looked upon favourably by the courts but there was a more than likely chance they would see the inside of a prison cell themselves. Their wives and children would also need to get out of Mexico and return to the US to go into hiding.

Throughout one intense month the brothers were tasked with an unimaginable and highly dangerous undercover operation that required not only nerves of steel but the ability to outsmart a dangerous man, all while using recording equipment that was chunky, hard to hide and lacking in sophistication. Despite the dangers and the challenges they faced they recorded around 70 conversations, including one conversation on 15 November that had El Chapo sing like a canary about a 20-kilogram shipment of cocaine to Chicago. It would be a conversation that would solidify the charges against him when he was eventually arrested in 2014. Weeks later the brothers were flown out of the middle of Mexico's war zone, while their families were forced to flee on foot.

In the US the brothers' work to catch drug traffickers was ongoing. A series of tapped phone calls to their associates in the 'windy city' led to dozens of arrests. The case was dubbed the 'most significant drug case in the history of Chicago's federal court'. Testimony from the brothers helped to secure indictments against 54 defendants, including El Chapo.



Despite their best efforts to turn over a new leaf, the news that the brothers had become informants dismayed the pair's father. The Flores brothers pleaded with their father not to return to Mexico but he refused to listen, homesick for the place he had built a life in since the late 90s. Shortly after their father returned, a note was found on the windshield of his abandoned car. The note warned the brothers to keep their mouths shut. Flores Sr never came back to the US or was heard from again and to this day, his whereabouts remain unknown. He is presumed dead.

The twins' cooperation was a huge breakthrough for the DEA, but the brothers had their own crimes to answer for, and more than six years after they had returned to the US they stood trial at the Everett McKinley Dirksen United States Courthouse in Chicago. They pleaded guilty to charges of trafficking drugs. Had the twins not handed themselves in and cooperated to the lengths that they had, they could have faced life in prison. Lawyers argued that their willingness to spill the beans should earn them an unprecedented break. During sentencing Judge Ruben Castillo told the court, "I look at the two Flores brothers and I think, growing up in Chicago under different circumstances, both of you gentlemen probably could have accomplished a great deal if you had been law-abiding, because there are a lot of things you are, but stupid is not one of them."

The brothers were given 14 years in prison – extra time was added to their sentence for smuggling 276 kilograms of cocaine into the US during their time cooperating without informing the government. They are expected to be released sometime during or after 2021. El Chapo, just like dozens of other cartel associates will never be released.

**ABOVE** In the run-up to their sentencing, Peter and Junior Flores expressed to the courts the shame they felt for their illegal activities with cartel members, pleading for mercy so that they might eventually return home to their families.

**TOP** The Flores brothers' testimonies gave police the chance to examine the involvement of every cartel associate known to the pair, including the bosses' sons such as Vicente Zambada Niebla.





Nine men and women, suspected cartel members, swing from a bridge in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, a product of a war waged between Los Zetas and rival narcos.





# LOS ZETAS

BRUTAL BLOODY CHAOS LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN  
BEFORE — WHAT HAPPENED WHEN MEXICO'S  
ELITE COMMANDOS WENT ROGUE AND SWITCHED  
SIDES TO FORM THEIR OWN CARTEL

WORDS PAUL FRENCH





In the late-1980s and early-1990s, Mexico was threatened by two major problems – the rise of the country's powerful new drug cartels, and heavily armed left-wing revolutionary insurgents looking to overthrow the government. Back then, the Guadalajara and the Tijuana Cartels were just starting to become seriously wealthy and increasingly violent as they expanded into the cocaine trade as middlemen for the Colombian cartels. Inevitably, they butted heads over turf. Simultaneously, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (the Zapatistas, or the EZLN) was starting to make its presence felt in Chiapas, Mexico's most southern state. The rising power of the Mexican cartels combined with armed revolutionary movements suggested that Mexico could go the way of Colombia in the 1980s: here, the incredible power of the Cali and Medellín cocaine cartels, as well as the insurgencies led by the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), had led to the creation of a seemingly lawless narco-state. The result had been permanent conflict, about which there was seemingly little the Bogotá government could do.

But despite the growing violence and reach of both the cartels and the Zapatistas, Mexico didn't quite fall into the hands of the cartels. Many believe the key reason Mexico did not replicate Colombia at that time was the existence of the Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, Mexico's Special-Forces Airmobile Group, known to everyone simply as GAFE.

GAFE commandos were the elite, highly trained in all techniques of counter-insurgency, both military and psychological, and extremely well armed and equipped. They were experienced in black-ops and led by veteran officers who commanded the unquestioning loyalty and respect of their men – the crème de la crème of Mexico's armed forces. Though never confirmed, it is believed that GAFE commandos received training in urban warfare and counter-insurgency from both Israeli and American Special Forces. In the first half of the 1990s, the men of GAFE were to be given a platform to show just how lethal their skills were.

First GAFE commandos went to war against the cartels, then they targeted the Zapatistas. Their onslaughts against the cartels saw multiple drug barons of the Tijuana, Guadalajara and the so-called Gulf Cartel (which controls the territory in Tamaulipas state on the US-Mexican border) arrested and a large number of lower level cartel soldiers killed in gun battles. In the mid-1990s, GAFE turned their attention to the Zapatistas. They were ruthless. Storming several key towns across Chiapas state, where approximately 3,000 Zapatistas were in control, they overwhelmed the guerrillas. Within a few hours, more than 30 senior Zapatista leaders were dead and hundreds of Zapatista fighters killed or captured. The dead leadership were lined up on a riverbank for all to see, their ears and noses sliced off. The surviving Zapatistas retreated deep into the jungles and in to relative obscurity. Though the EZLN remains in existence today, operating in Chiapas's remote Lacandon rainforest, it has never been able to regroup and recover its former power. It has never been able to build enough strength to successfully engage militarily with GAFE again.

## SWITCHING SIDES: 'Z1'

The Mexican cartel bosses learned a different lesson than the Zapatistas from their losses to GAFE. The cartels had been bruised by GAFE's overwhelming violence and firepower, many of their founders and leaders sent to prison, and they (especially the Gulf Cartel) were engaged in violent turf wars



Los Zetas hold a Gulf Cartel member at gunpoint for a video, prior to an 'interrogation'. He was then clubbed unconscious and beheaded – a surprisingly humane method of dispatching a rival

## “ LOS ZETAS RAPIDLY BECAME A HIGHLY FEARED GANG, ENFORCING THE WRIT OF THE CARTEL'S BUSINESS WITH EXTREME VIOLENCE ”

that were costly both in terms of lost business and men. But, thanks to transshipping Colombian cocaine into the USA, the cartels were making more money than ever before. So the Gulf Cartel decided to make an investment – they bought 'Z1'.

Hindsight may show that buying Z1 was not the smartest thing the Gulf Cartel ever did – but it looked like a winning move at the time. Z1 was Arturo Guzmán Decena, a senior GAFE commando who had been a leader of the brutal raids on the Zapatistas. Z1 was his personal radio code. After the raids on the EZLN in Chiapas, Z1 was made security chief of the town of El Carrizo, Tamaulipas. The bosses of the Gulf Cartel first offered him bribes to look the other way as drug shipments passed through town. Then, in 1997, he switched sides, deserting from GAFE and becoming a 'narco-mercenary'. Z1 was employed by the Gulf Cartel to operate their security force; he lured 30 highly trained GAFE commandos to join him (more followed in time) and dubbed himself and his men Los Zetas, after their Z radio codes.

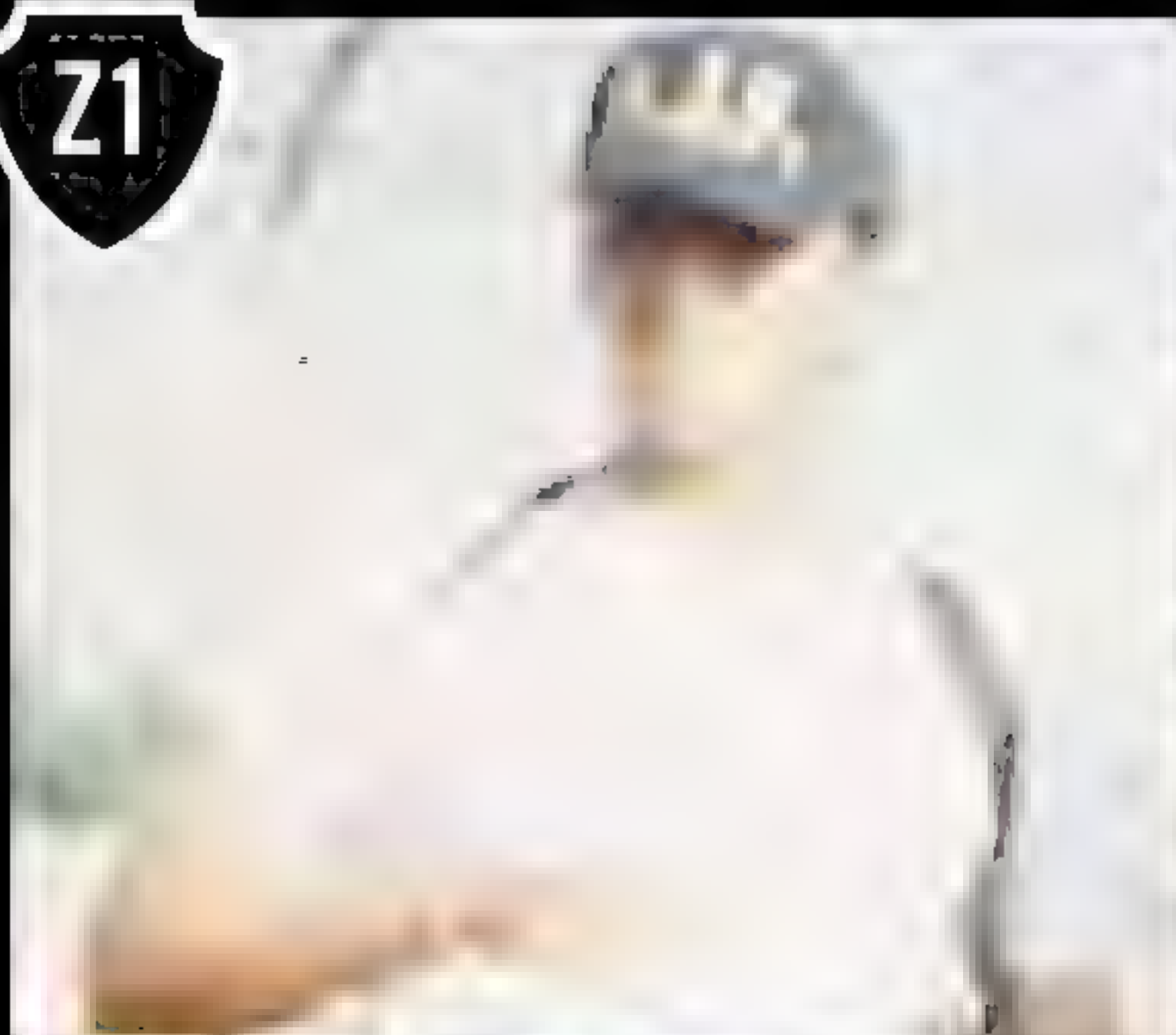
Los Zetas rapidly became a highly feared gang, enforcing the writ of the cartel's narcotics, extortion, kidnapping and prostitution business with extreme violence. The Gulf Cartel had wanted the sort of retribution on their enemies that they had seen the GAFE deal out to the Zapatistas. They got what they paid for. Los Zetas soon earned a reputation for cruelty and barbaric acts – beheadings, dismemberments, live burials, the execution of entire families. These were the tactics of military counter-insurgency as learned at the feet of the Israelis and Americans, now in the service of the Gulf Cartel.



# MEXICO'S NARCO-MERCENARIES

THEY WERE MEXICO'S ELITE FORCES – HIGHLY TRAINED, SKILLED, LOYAL – BUT THEY BECAME MEXICO'S MOST VIOLENT AND WANTED DRUG CARTEL

Z1

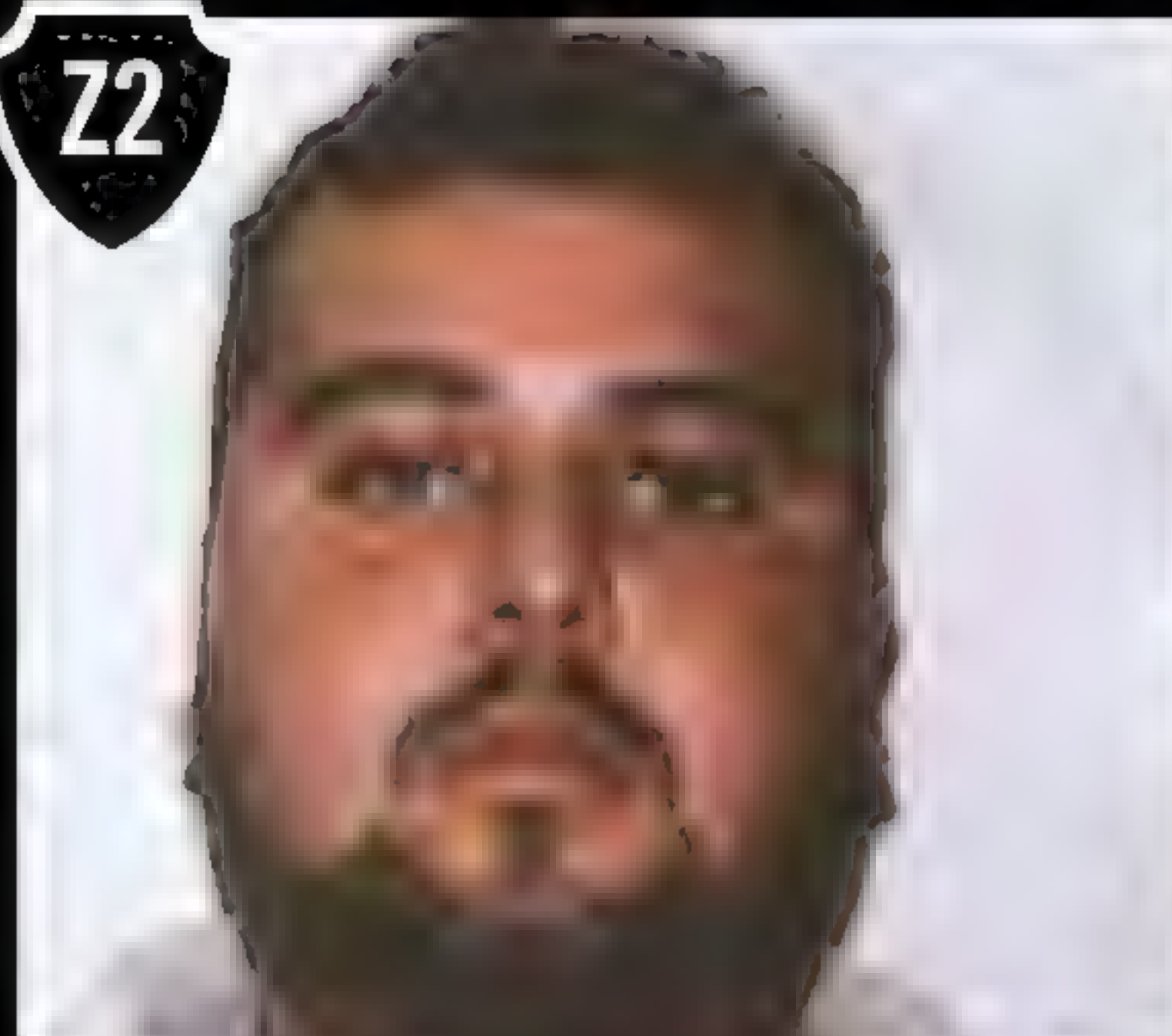


## ARTURO GUZMÁN DECENA

The founder and initial leader of Los Zetas rose from poverty to have a glittering military career before turning his back on GAFE. He was a leading officer in the 1994 massacre of Zapatistas in Chiapas, and died in a shoot-out with former comrades still in GAFE in 2002 – he was just 26 years old.

DECEASED

Z2

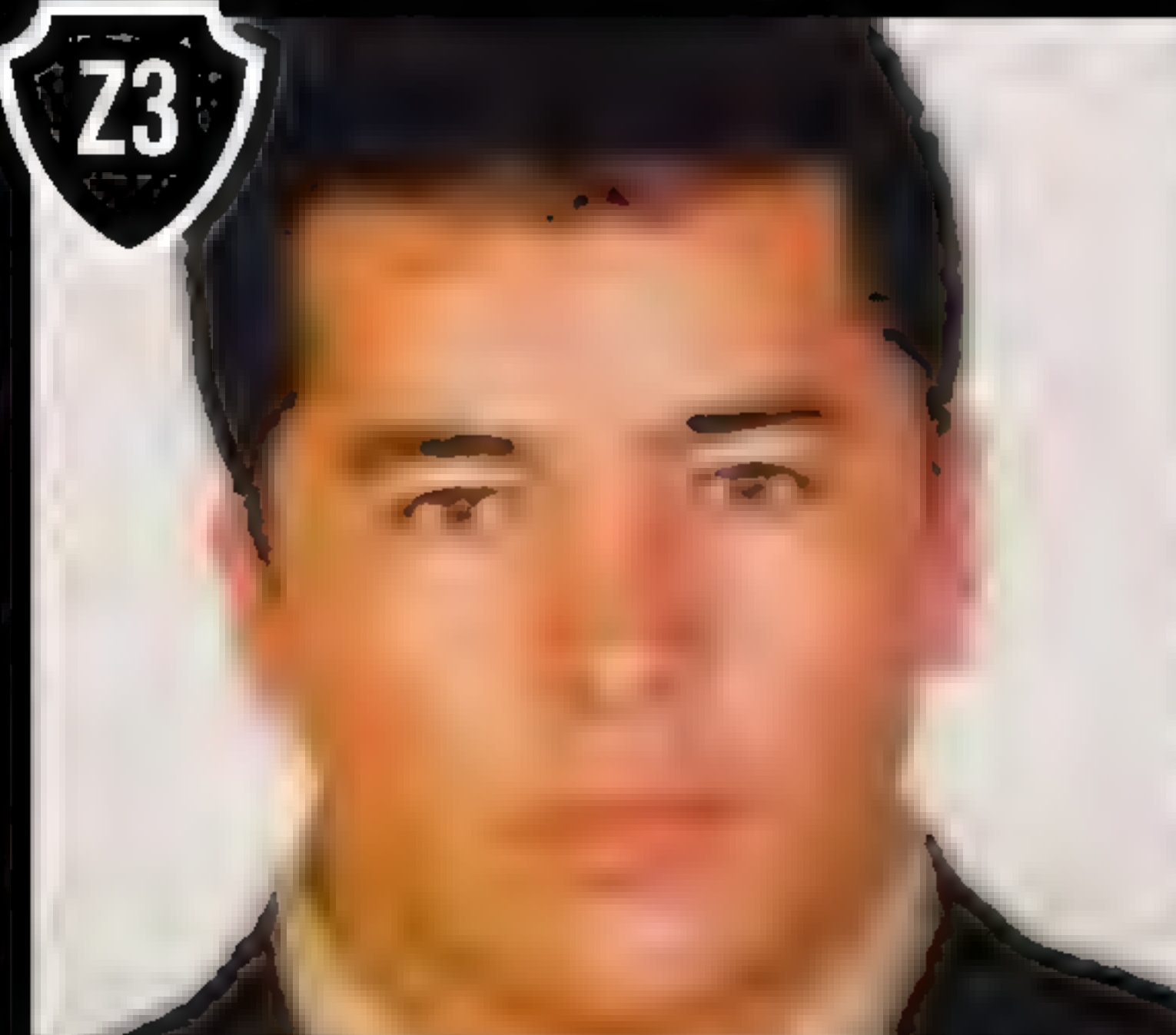


## ROGELIO GONZÁLEZ PIZANA

González Pizaña is the exception that proves the rule in Los Zetas. Despite being second-in-command, his background was not in the army. He was arrested in 2004 and given a sentence of 16 years, but was released in 2014. He was murdered with family members in 2015.

DECEASED

Z3



## HERIBERTO LAZCANO LAZCANO

Z3, alias El Lazca, took over Los Zetas after Guzmán Decena's death. He had joined the Mexican army at 17 and was renowned for his cruelty, especially in the use of extreme torture methods. Z3 died in a firefight with Mexican naval marines in 2012 after a massive manhunt to track him down.

DECEASED

Z40



IMPRISONED

## MIGUEL ÁNGEL TREVIÑO MORALES

Z40 succeeded Z3. His speciality was intimidating government officials and policemen. He is believed to be responsible for the death of 72 migrants and 163 civilians in bombings.

Z42



IMPRISONED

## ÓSCAR OMAR TREVIÑO MORALES

Brother of Z40 and his successor after his arrest, Z42 was a major drug trafficker and not afraid to use violence to ensure his routes were protected before his arrest in 2015.

Z7



IMPRISONED FOR LIFE

## JESÚS ENRIQUE REJÓN AGUILAR

The former GAFE commando is thought to have been head of training with Los Zetas and to have organised military style raids on prisons to free Los Zetas members.

Z14

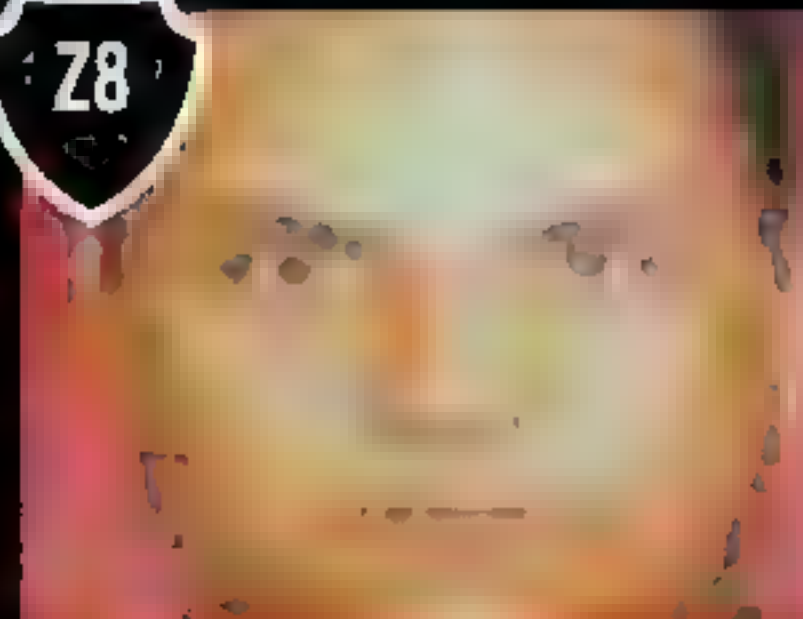


DECEASED

## EFRAÍN TEODORO TORRES

Formerly Mexican Army special forces, Z14 was in charge of overseeing drug shipments across the Gulf of Mexico, and was long considered one of Mexico's most wanted criminals.

Z8



COMMITTED SUICIDE

## ÓSCAR EDUARDO GUERRERO SILVA

Strangely known as El Winnie Pooh, he is best known for organising a massive prison break of imprisoned Gulf Cartel leaders in 2004; 25 men escaped in 15 minutes.

Z50



IMPRISONED

## IVÁN VELÁZQUEZ CABALLERO

In control of trafficking operations across several Mexican states, he had an army of 400 men to ensure that his shipments were not interfered with or hijacked.

Z16



IMPRISONED

## RAÚL LUCIO HERNÁNDEZ LECHUGA

An original founder, 'El Lucky' was deemed a narcotics kingpin by the US and arrested in 2011 accused of controlling drug-trafficking operations in ten Mexican states.

Z20



DECEASED

## BRAULIO ARELLANO DOMÍNGUEZ

Another original founder, he was thought to have personally been responsible for bribing a number of senior-level politicians on behalf of the Gulf Cartel in Veracruz.

EL FLANDERS



DECEASED

## RAÚL HERNÁNDEZ BARRÓN

El Flanders was a former GAFE commando who rose to become the chief assassin for Los Zetas. He was tracked down to Tamaulipas and shot by Mexican Marines in 2014.

EL HUMMER



IMPRISONED

## JAIME GONZÁLEZ DURÁN

Referred to as El Hummer due to his taste in large American cars, he was responsible for ensuring cocaine made it across the border into the US. He was arrested and given a 35-year sentence.

Z9



DECEASED

## GALINDO MELLADO CRUZ

Z9 was an early member of Los Zetas. It is believed he became a key member of the Gulf Cartel with a strong reputation for extreme violence. In 2014, police tracked him down and he was killed.





As Los Zetas begin to splinter under pressure from the Mexican armed forces, an ambushed cartel camp turns up a weapons stockpile

**ABOVE** The then head of Mexico's Los Zetas, Omar Trevino Morales, is finally arrested on 4 March 2015, delivering another blow to the weakened cartel

### IT WASN'T JUST THE MONEY

Many believed that Guzmán Decena's betrayal of GAFE, and his recruitment of dozens of other GAFE commandos to form Los Zetas, was simply about money – that the Gulf Cartel paid more than the government. This was probably a factor – the cartel could pay pretty much anything Guzmán Decena and his men asked. But there was more to their change of allegiance than simply cash.

GAFE officers and commandos were actually well paid and had comfortable lives. They were paid high salaries precisely to prevent this kind of corruption. However, Guzmán Decena and the other former GAFE founders of Los Zetas had other concerns.

1997 was a watershed year in Mexican politics. The long dominant Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI, lost absolute power and the newly elected political parties started to talk about investigations into previous human rights abuses by, among others, GAFE. The Los Zetas, like Guzmán Decena, knew exactly what they had done to the

Zapatistas and others – they had clearly abused human rights in their campaign. They had also seen what had happened in Argentina after the country's defeat in the Falklands War, the collapse of the military junta in Buenos Aires and the commissions prosecuting those who fought the junta's so-called 'Dirty War'. Quite simply, the men who decided to switch sides and become Los Zetas saw no alternative in the new, democratic, Mexico but to become outlaws and join with the cartels. It was that or prison and disgrace.

Just as the GAFE commandos had shown their loyalty to the government when they fought the cartels and exterminated the leadership of the Zapatistas, so Los Zetas would be expected to show loyalty to their new bosses. Protection of the Gulf Cartel's narcotics and retribution against any who tried to argue with the cartel was not enough. Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who was the first Gulf Cartel boss to approach Z1 with the idea for Los Zetas to act as the cartel's enforcement arm, also had his own motives. The top boss of the Gulf Cartel, Juan García Ábrego, had been captured by GAFE commandos in 1996 and immediately extradited to the USA, where he was swiftly handed 11 consecutive life terms – he would never see Mexico again. The leadership of the Gulf Cartel was jointly in the hands of Cárdenas Guillén and his close associate Salvador Gómez Herrera, alias El Chava (a common nickname for people named Salvador).

**“LOS ZETAS PROVED THAT THEY WERE QUITE WILLING TO USE HAND GRENADES IN AREAS POPULATED BY CIVILIANS”**

## LOS ZETAS BOOT CAMP

COULD LOS ZETAS BE TRAINING AND 'SKILLING UP' AMERICAN STREET GANGS IN THEIR EXTREME VIOLENCE?

In recent years there have been reports that skilled Los Zetas members – ex-GAFE, trained themselves by Israeli and US Special Forces – may be passing on their skills to US street gangs. The result, the FBI believes, is that the level of mayhem and carnage on the USA's streets could be about to

escalate. The FBI has tracked alliances between Los Zetas members and the Sureños gangs that are strong in California's prison system as well as the Mexican Mafia and Latin Kings gangs in several US cities. Most alarming is the FBI's contention that Los Zetas veterans have been “training”

members of MS-13, a US-wide street gang associated with large-scale violence and composed mostly of men with Salvadoran heritage. These ties would indicate both an alliance between extremely violent organisations and also a spread of Los Zetas influence in the Americas beyond Mexico.





## PROVE YOU'RE A KILLER

In mid-1999, Cárdenas Guillén ordered Z1 to show his loyalty by executing his rival El Chava. Z1 did as he was asked. He concealed himself in the back seat of Cárdenas Guillén's car as it drove to El Chava's young daughter's baptism ceremony. After the ceremony, Cárdenas Guillén offered El Chava a ride, the two drug lords laughing and sharing jokes. Then, once they were away from prying eyes, Z1 revealed himself and shot El Chava in the back of the head, dumping his body by the side of the road where it was not found for some weeks. Cárdenas Guillén was ever after known as Mata Amigos (the Friend Killer), and Z1 became his most trusted lieutenant.

But the alliance was not to last long. In 2002, Mexican commandos tracked their one-time errant colleague down as he visited his mistress in Matamoros town, Tamaulipas. Z1 was Public Enemy Number One, the good guy gone bad – an example needed to be made. He was killed in a hail of gunfire. Several days later, outside the apartment where Z1 died, a large wreath was left on the pavement with a message: "You will always be in our hearts. From your family, Los Zetas." And, just in case that didn't show how the remaining Los Zetas felt about the loss of their creator and leader, they executed four senior members of the Tamaulipas state judiciary and their families for revenge.

But the Mexican government pressed on with their campaign against both the Gulf Cartel and its enforcement division, Los Zetas. A year after Z1's death, Cárdenas Guillén was captured by GAFE commandos and extradited to the USA – he will remain in prison until 2025 at least. Several other renegade GAFE commandos who had joined Los Zetas were hunted down and killed. In to the leadership vacuum stepped Heriberto Lazcano, known to most as Z3.

## TO BE A CARTEL

The fact was that with the main leaders of the Gulf Cartel either in prison in the USA or dying in internal feuds, the greater discipline and former military loyalties of the

members of Los Zetas meant that, by 2010, they were a far more cohesive, organised and wealthy organisation than the cartel that originally conceived them. Z3 decided that Los Zetas should move up from being just the enforcement arm of a cartel to a fully fledged cartel itself. And not just a narcotics trafficking organisation – Los Zetas, due to its very special skills set – also became a major extortion and kidnapping machine throughout Tamaulipas.

The Gulf Cartel didn't let them go quietly, and war broke out, but it was impossible to compete with the training in extreme violence and the atrocities of Los Zetas. Los Zetas proved that they were quite willing to use hand grenades in areas populated by civilians in the full knowledge innocent people would die. To take over people-trafficking operations they hijacked their rivals' shipments killing both the traffickers and their human cargo to make their point. They bombed Gulf Cartel-run casinos and clubs causing mayhem and multiple murders of civilians. Z3, the organisation's new leader, set the standard for ruthlessness. His extreme torture methods earned him the nickname El Verdugo (The Executioner) – his favourite 'method of persuasion' was to feed his victims to the lions and tigers he kept at his ranch.

The Mexican government could not let these atrocities go. They targeted Los Zetas to an even greater degree than they had previously zeroed in on the cartels or the Zapatistas. Los Zetas had become too powerful; too far above the law. GAFE took action. In 2012, Lazcano was killed in a firefight with commandos close to the Mexican border. In the years since, more of Los Zetas' original leaders have been caught and killed – they rarely come quietly and, unsurprisingly perhaps, seem to prefer to go out in a machine-gun blaze of glory. They are men who have literally lived and died by the gun.

For now, Los Zetas seems to be in retreat, its surviving members huddled together in splinter groups known as grupúsculos. However, both the Mexican and American authorities believe there are still reasons to fear Los Zetas – they remain highly skilled soldiers with no other options than to fight. A resurgence is a distinct possibility, say many organised crime analysts in the USA and Latin America.

**ABOVE** Los Zetas raised the bar when it came to sending shocking messages, so the cartel's rivals upped their game, killing and dumping 35 Los Zetas members on a Mexican highway in 2011





Wherever there are cartels, there will be violence. This is the scene of a mass shooting after two gangsters met on the streets of Naples in 2019

# THE COMPETITION

LATIN AMERICA IS NOT ALONE IN PRODUCING DRUG CARTELS  
— EVERY CONTINENT HAS ITS OWN MAJOR PLAYERS

WORDS PAUL FRENCH

**C**rime is an international business. Become a cartel of any size, anywhere and you'll soon start dealing with criminals in other countries. Italian drugs ship to the Ivory coast; North Korean meth to Australia; Vietnamese opium to France.

The international super-league of criminal organisations is a list of the survivors – those who've survived political change, war, police and state suppression. Consider the triad gangs of southern China – survivors of colonialism, Japanese occupation and communism. Other gangs have almost become part of the political and economic infrastructure of their home

countries – the yakuza in Japan are your landlords, your charitable donors, your bus operators and your trash collectors, as well as your loan sharks. They wear suits and shake hands with politicians.

It really is a case of 'adapt or die'. When communist China got too hot for the Hong Kong triads, they refocused on the casinos of Macao and the ethnic Chinese diaspora in a thousand Chinatowns around the world. When the 'French Connection' was busted with the end of French colonialism in Asia, the Corsican Mafia diversified into slot machines and gambling. More than anyone else, Russia's Vory v Zakone – the 'Thieves in Law' – have adapted

again and again and again – from the grim days of the Soviet Union to the Wild East of Yeltsin to a seemingly sensible accommodation with Vladimir Putin.

Survivors adapt to circumstances. Most super-league cartels have got into cyber crime. In Turkey, the war in neighbouring Syria has led to a rise in migrant smuggling activities and people trafficking. The most successful cartels mix guns and drugs with legit activities – Mumbai's D-Company owns a fair chunk of the Dubai skyline.

These are the top ten survivors outside Latin America and guess what? Many of them are in partnerships with various Latin American cartels.





ABOVE Former 14K triad boss Broken Tooth Koi being released from jail in Macao, accompanied by his mother.

## THE 14K TRIAD

HONG KONG, 1945-PRESENT

LARGE-SCALE DRUG TRAFFICKERS OUT OF SOUTHEAST ASIA WITH A BASE IN HONG KONG

The 14K was formed in 1945 by disaffected Chinese Nationalist army officers at the end of World War II, in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. It originally comprised of 14 soldiers who had served with the Chinese Kuomintang (or Nationalist) government against Japan – hence 14K. However, the K can also stand for Kowloon, where the triad gang is largely based. The triad is mostly composed of Cantonese-speaking Chinese. Extremely anti-communist and Hong Kong-based, the triad has now begun to set up operations in mainland China too.

The 14K faces major opposition from the Communist Party in mainland China, as well as increasing attention in Hong Kong, and this is encouraging the triad to extend its operations internationally, especially throughout the Chinese global diaspora. There has also been a noticeable ramping up of activities in Africa, largely following the swathes of Chinese involvement in the continent during the last decade.

With the rise of nearby Macao as a gambling mecca following the end of Portuguese colonial rule, the 14K has targeted the southern Chinese enclave for business – being just a short ferry ride from both Hong Kong and southern China's Guangdong province. Former 14K leader Broken Tooth Koi ran the 14K in Macao, though was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his crimes. He was released in 2012 and is now back in the gambling business.

Of course, the 14K doesn't have all the southern China action to itself and is in perpetual rivalry and occasional war with the equally powerful Sun Yee On triad, also based in Hong Kong. Given the size of the Chinese diaspora, reports of 14K criminal activity in just about every country around the world are unsurprising. Indeed, the 14K and Sun Yee On are two of the most deeply and globalised embedded drug cartels and criminal organisations in history.

With the ongoing pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, the 14K triad has

been accused of backing the pro-Beijing government forces and police, becoming involved in violence and beating up protestors. Some suggest that this could be a sign that the 14K has reached an accommodation with the Communist Party in Beijing to become what has been termed 'patriotic triads'.

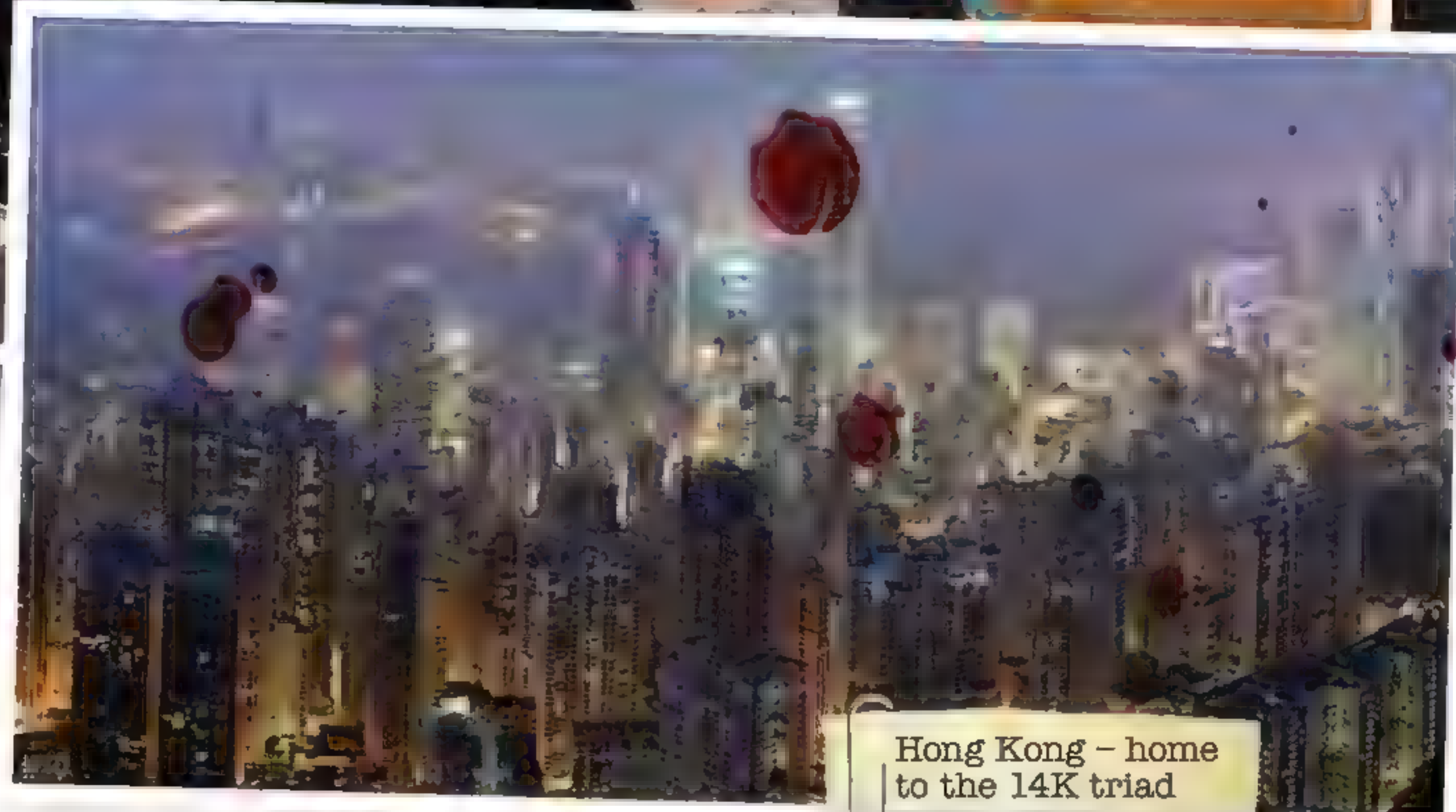
ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 6/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 5/10

VIOLENCE: 7/10

GLOBAL REACH: 10/10

ACTIVITIES: Drug trafficking, gambling, prostitution, kidnapping, racketeering, counterfeiting (currency and documents), people trafficking, hacking, cryptocurrency and blockchain, illegal immigration facilitation, money laundering, loan sharking, fake luxury goods production



Hong Kong – home to the 14K triad



## SUN YEE ON

HONG KONG/SOUTHERN CHINA, 1919 TO PRESENT

THE 14K'S MAJOR RIVAL AND ANOTHER HONG KONG-BASED TRIAD WITH EXTENSIVE GLOBAL LINKS

The Sun Yee On, or New Righteousness and Peace Commercial and Industrial Guild, was founded in southern China in 1919, several years after the proclamation of the new Chinese Republic in 1911. The Sun Yee On is arguably larger in membership terms than its major rival, the 14K triad, though is generally seen as less violent. As with other major triad groups it has managed to become an international criminal organisation via its links throughout the extensive Chinese diaspora across North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Southeast Asia.

The Sun Yee On has used two successful strategies to increase its power and wealth. Firstly, it has concentrated its membership in Hong Kong among Teochew and Hokkien ethnic group immigrants to the city state –

this allows for very tight relationships based on clan, guild, village and family. Secondly, from an early period it began to infiltrate Sun Yee On loyal members into the Hong Kong police force.

While a sizeable player in the narcotics trade, the majority of Sun Yee On's income is thought to come from prostitution, the vice industry and protection services. Unlike the 14K, Sun Yee On does not appear to have been able to capitalise on the goldmine of new gambling cash in nearby Macao. However, the triad organisation does have long and established links into southern China and the border areas between Hong Kong and the People's Republic, particularly the 'Wild East' city of Shenzhen, which has an extensive drugs, sex and illegal gambling economy.

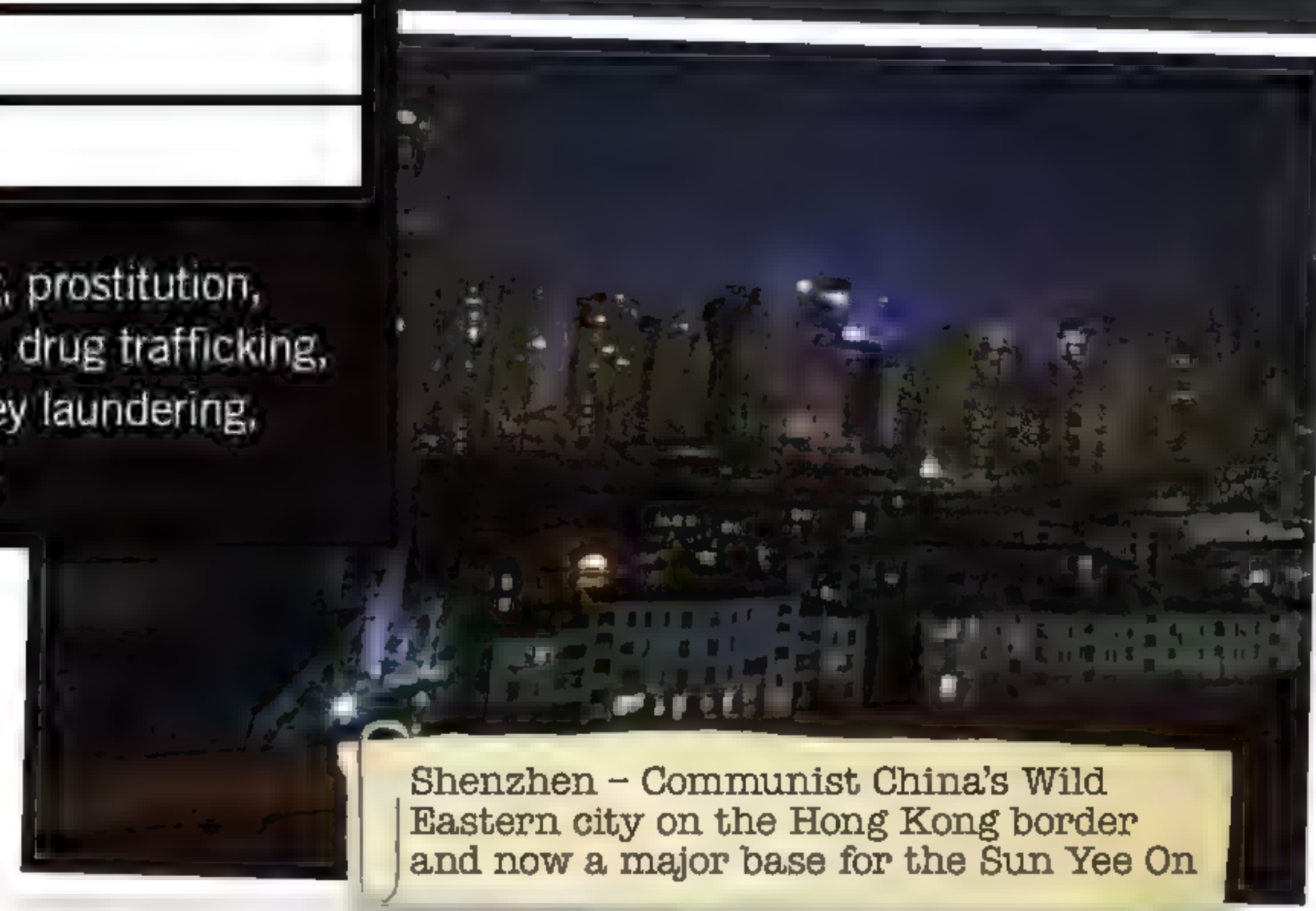
ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 7/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 6/10

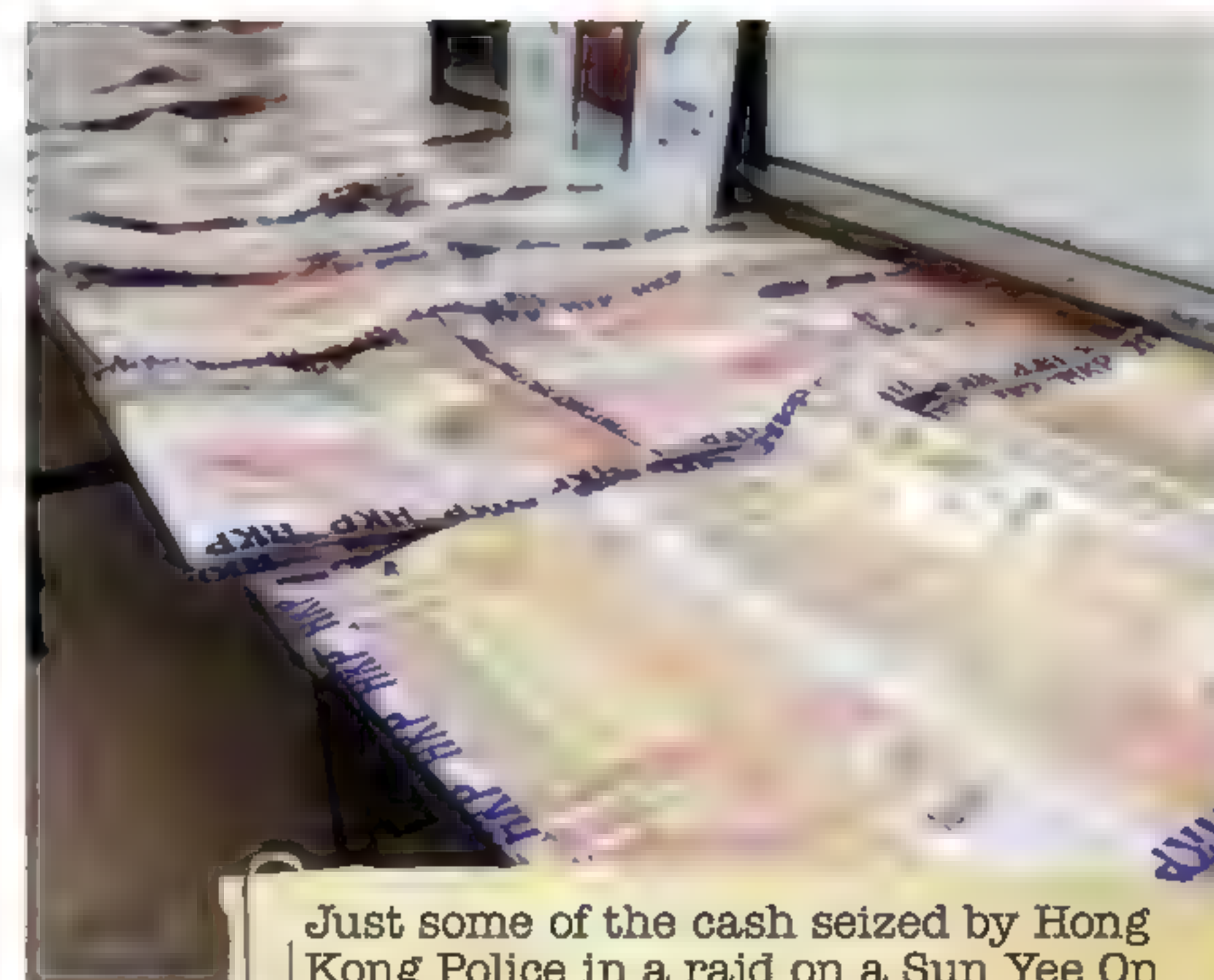
VIOLENCE: 4/10

GLOBAL REACH: 9/10

ACTIVITIES: Racketeering, prostitution, counterfeiting, extortion, drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, murder, illegal gambling



Shenzhen – Communist China's Wild Eastern city on the Hong Kong border and now a major base for the Sun Yee On



Just some of the cash seized by Hong Kong Police in a raid on a Sun Yee On money laundering operation

## WO SHING WO (WSW)

HONG KONG/MACAO, 1930-PRESENT

A HONG KONG TRIAD WHOSE MEMBERS HAIL FROM FAR AND WIDE ACROSS THE ASIAN CONTINENT

Unlike the 14K and Sun Yee On, WSW is not exclusively ethnically Chinese – it accepts members from other Asian nationalities. This is partly due to the racial mix in Hong Kong, where the WSW rose to prominence – Koreans who were involved in smuggling from the time of the Korean War, Thai gangsters involved in smuggling and other criminal activities during the Vietnam War, and members who arrived in Hong Kong as Vietnamese 'boat people' refugees.

From its inception in the 1930s, the WSW has worked hard to become prominent in Chinatowns around the world – notably Toronto, where the WSW was based during World War II and the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. The WSW remains strong in Hong Kong and the police there believe them to be Hong Kong's No 1 drug trafficker.

WSW violence has escalated in recent decades as the organisation has moved into European cities, most notably London and its Chinatown, where the police have blamed a rise in violent encounters on the WSW muscling in on protection operations. In Hong Kong the WSW is known for its control of three of the 'Red Minibus Routes', forcing bus drivers to pay protection money.

Australia has been a focus for the WSW too of late, with a rise in the number of Chinese migrants. WSW activities have been noted by the Australian police in Melbourne, where WSW drugs have been outsourced for street sale to Vietnamese and Romanian gangs. Additionally, Ireland, Holland and a number of other countries have encountered major WSW cannabis farming enterprises on their territory.

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 6/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 5/10

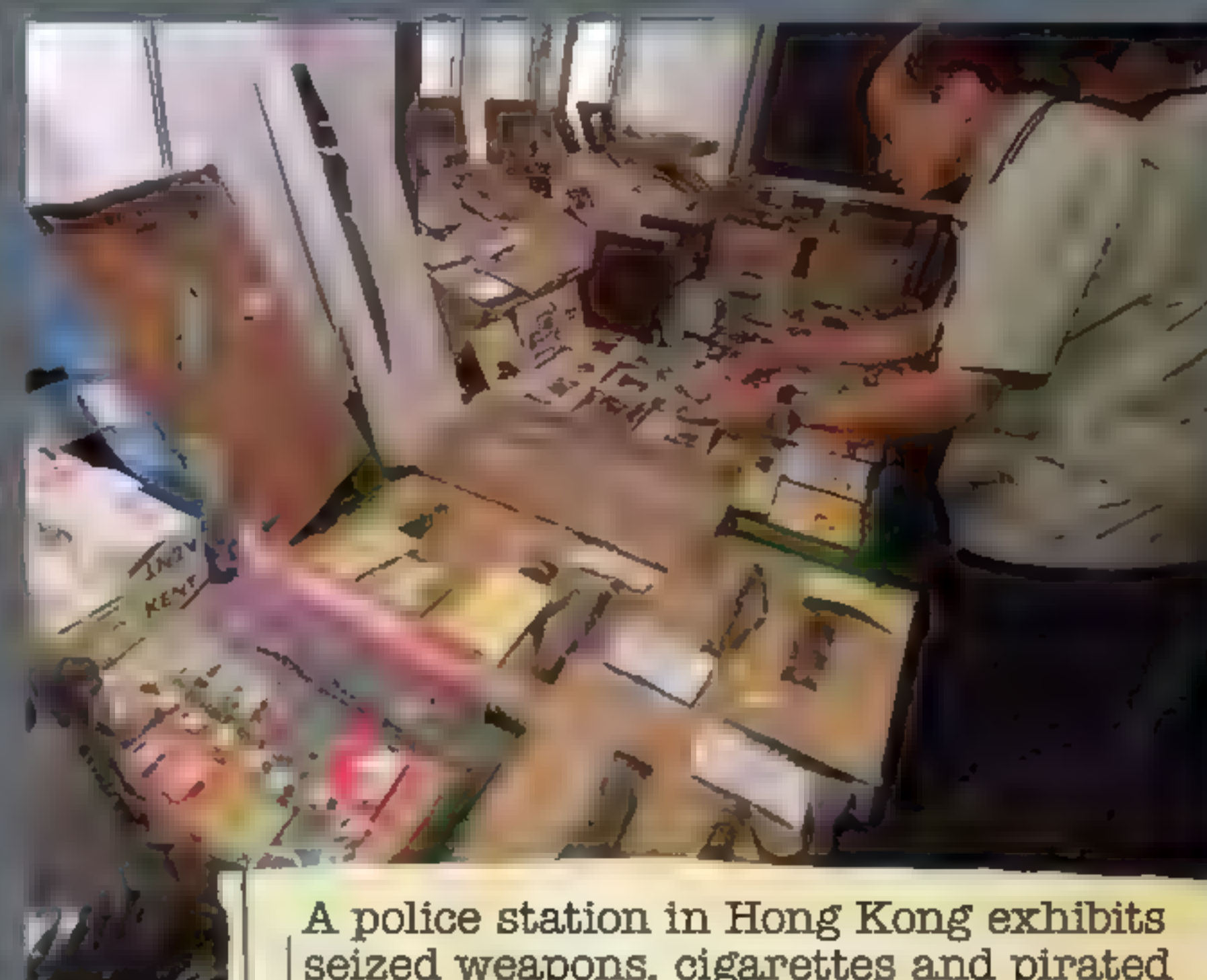
VIOLENCE: 8/10

GLOBAL REACH: 9/10

ACTIVITIES: Extortion, illegal immigration, kidnapping, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, arson (insurance fraud), prostitution, people trafficking, money laundering, smuggling of rare foods (birds' nests, abalone, sharks' fins etc)



The WSW recruited from the desperate Vietnamese boat people, who arrived in Hong Kong as refugees after the war



A police station in Hong Kong exhibits seized weapons, cigarettes and pirated CDs after a 2002 raid on the WSW triad





ABOVE Japanese police raid the HQ of the Yamaguchi-gumi in Kobe in 2015

## THE YAMAGUCHI-GUMI

JAPAN, 1915-PRESENT

THE YAMAGUCHI-GUMI IS JAPAN'S LARGEST YAKUZA ORGANISATION WITH THOUSANDS OF ACTIVE MEMBERS

**T**he Yamaguchi-gumi is the largest of the four major yakuza gangs in Japan. Based in Kobe, it was created by dock workers in 1915 and named after its founder, Harukichi Yamaguchi. The organisation is massive and makes billions of dollars a year from its criminal activities. As well as the usual drugs, prostitution, protection rackets and so on, the Yamaguchi-gumi profited from construction kickbacks, cement plants and other investments made during Japan's 'bubble economy' of construction in the 80s.

Although Yamaguchi-gumi has expanded overseas – to the USA and elsewhere in Asia – its primary expansion target at the moment is domestic and thought to be Tokyo, which could lead to war with other yakuza organisations based in the Japanese capital.

The Yamaguchi-gumi has become an almost legitimate organisation in a way

other cartels can only dream of – it's well known to politicians and trade unions, and was the major financial and aid donor during the 1995 Kobe earthquake.

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 6/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 4/10

VIOLENCE: 3/10

GLOBAL REACH: 3/10

ACTIVITIES: Drug trafficking, prostitution, pornography, fraud, blackmail, bookmaking, money laundering, mortgage fraud, internet hacking, labour union racketeering, political and election fraud, loan sharking, match fixing (baseball, soccer and sumo)

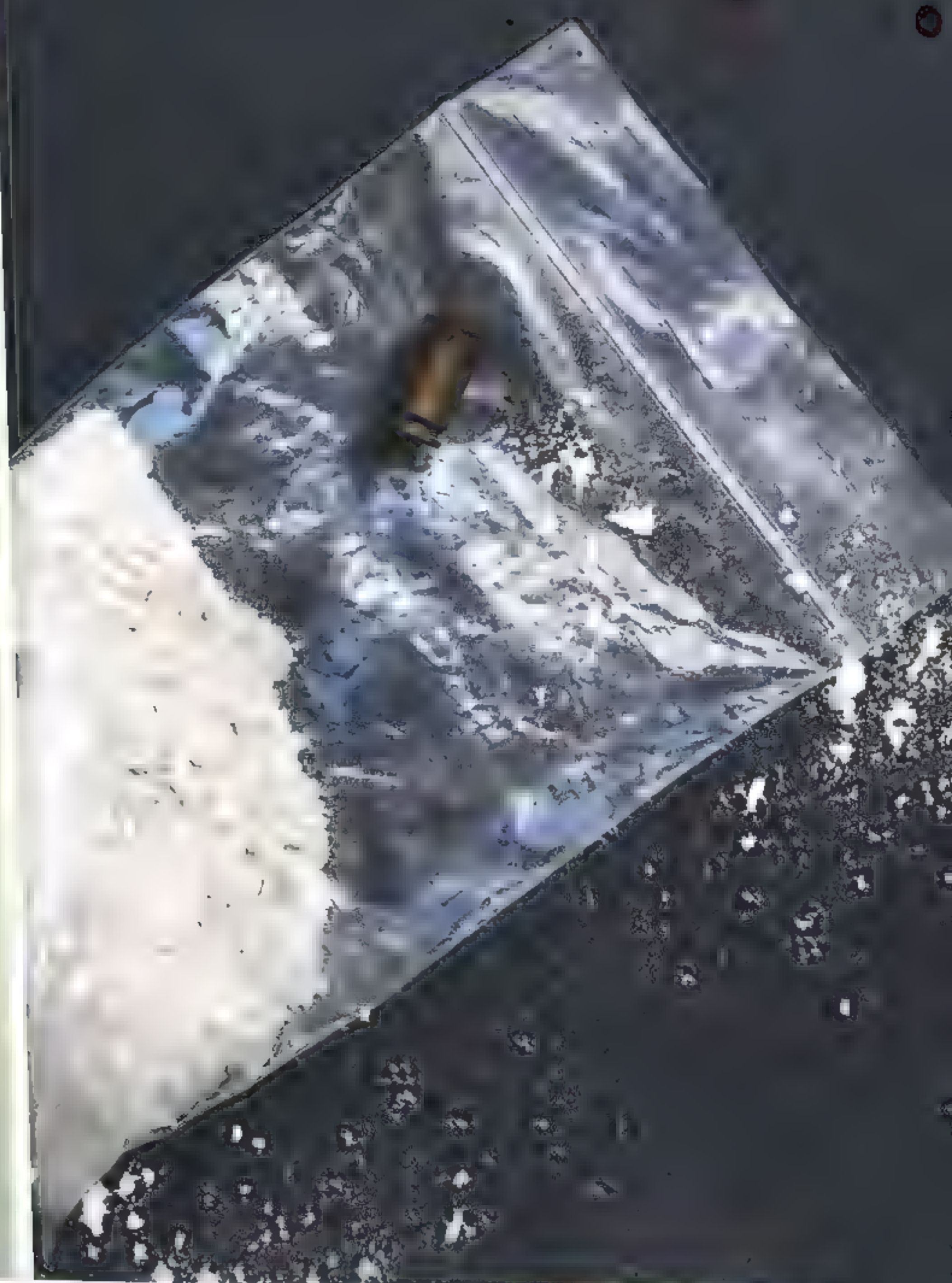


ABOVE Kenichi Shinoda, the current 'kumicho', or supreme kingpin, of the Yamaguchi-gumi





ABOVE Kim Jong-un, Supreme Leader of North Korea and boss of Division 39



ABOVE The North Korean vessel, the Pong Su, impounded by Australian Customs after heroin worth many millions of dollars was found bound for the Sydney market. A botched Division 39 operation

## DIVISION 39

NORTH KOREA, LATE 1970S-PRESENT

THE NORTH KOREAN GOVERNMENT'S DEPARTMENT OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES THAT'S INVOLVED IN VARIOUS DRUG-SMUGGLING OPERATIONS

**D**ivision 39 was set up by the ruling North Korean Workers' Party and the ruling Kim family clan in the late 1970s to achieve two major aims: 1) to use illegal activities to fund the purchase of luxury goods for distribution to favoured party members and key political/army sources to maintain their loyalty to the regime and 2) to provide an income to fund the lavish secret lifestyle of the Kim clan, including Kim Jong-il and the current North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un.

Division 39 has been involved in US\$ bill counterfeiting that the FBI admits

has produced the most convincing US\$100 bills they have ever seen. Additionally there have been seized shipments of opium (from government-owned poppy farms in the north), methamphetamine, and cocaine in shipments heading to Southeast Asia and Australia.

With the tightening of United Nations sanctions on North Korea, the operations of Division 39 are thought to have ramped up quite significantly – including gun running and even the smuggling of illegal nuclear weapons parts.

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 4/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 2/10

VIOLENCE: 2/10

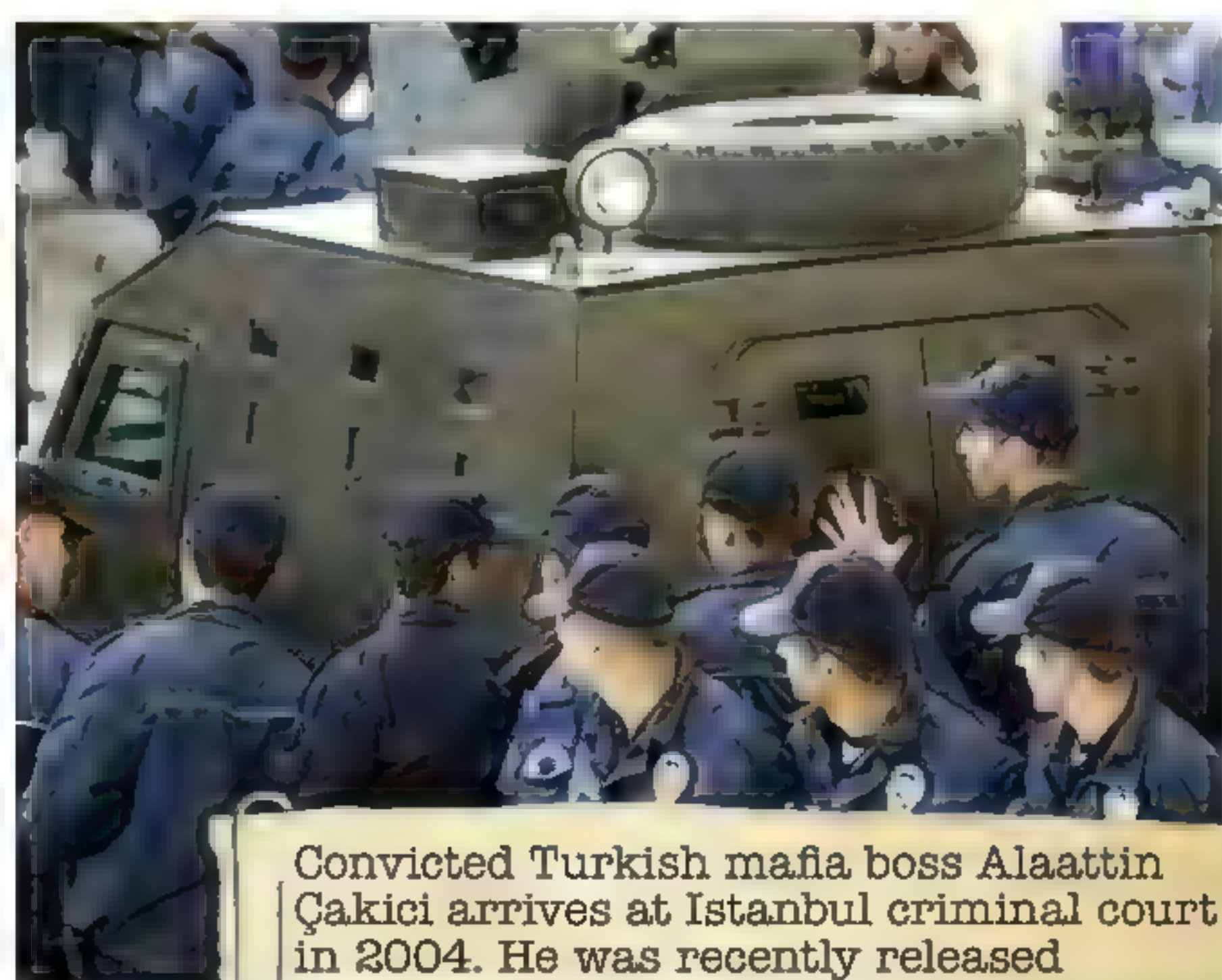
GLOBAL REACH: 4/10

ACTIVITIES: Drug smuggling, drug manufacture, money counterfeiting, luxury goods smuggling, weapons trafficking up to and including parts for nuclear weapons and bio-chemical weapons, assassination, illegal oil shipments





Turkish police raid an organised crime safe house in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul in 2015



Convicted Turkish mafia boss Alaattin Çakici arrives at Istanbul criminal court in 2004. He was recently released

## TURKISH MAFIA

TURKEY, 1970S-PRESENT

WITH ACCESS TO THE FORMER SOVIET UNION, INTO EUROPE, ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, AND WITH CATASTROPHIC WARS BEING FOUGHT ON ITS BORDERS, THE TURKISH MAFIA IS ALMOST UNIQUELY PLACED TO BECOME A GLOBAL FORCE

The loosely affiliated groups (including some Kurdish, Turkish Cypriot and Turkish diaspora groups) started out as gun-runners and then got into the heroin trade in the 1980s and, more recently (and thanks to the Syrian war on its doorstep), into people smuggling/trafficking.

The Turkish diaspora has grown significantly in the last 30 years and so the Turkish mafia's tentacles also now extend into western Europe, particularly Germany and the UK, and the Turkish-controlled portion of Cyprus. The rise in knife crime and 'county lines' drug trafficking in London has raised the profile of majority-Turkish street gangs, such as The Tottenham Boys and Hackney Boys.

The leadership structure of the Turkish mafia is based around a number of families and relies on them co-operating and not falling out.

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 4/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 3/10

VIOLENCE: 6/10

GLOBAL REACH: 5/10

ACTIVITIES: Gun trafficking, drug trafficking, people trafficking, money laundering, cyber crime, illegal oil shipments

## THE CAMORRA

ITALY, 17TH CENTURY-PRESENT

ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST CONTINUALLY FUNCTIONING CRIMINAL GANGS AND STILL GOING STRONG

The Camorra is based around the port city of Naples and the Italian region of Campania. In recent years it has risen to greater levels of wealth, power and notoriety than even the rival Sicilian mafia (Cosa Nostra). The Camorra also has a much higher profile these days, not least due to the book, movie and TV show franchise, *Gomorra*.

What sets the Camorra in the 21st century above other Italian organised crime mafias is its international growth and reach, which extends across Africa and Western Europe.

However, the spotlight that has fallen on the Camorra, both from the *Gomorra* TV series and a number of scandals around the illegal dumping of toxic waste, has been unwelcome and led to major clampdowns by the Italian state. In response the Camorra has targeted those shining a light on its activities, most notably the *Gomorra* author Roberto Saviano, who's received a number

of death threats and lived under police protection since October 2006.

The Camorra's emphasis on growth outside Italy is a result of the Italian state's success in arresting the leader figures, and confiscating large amounts of cash and property from the cartel.

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 7/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 5/10

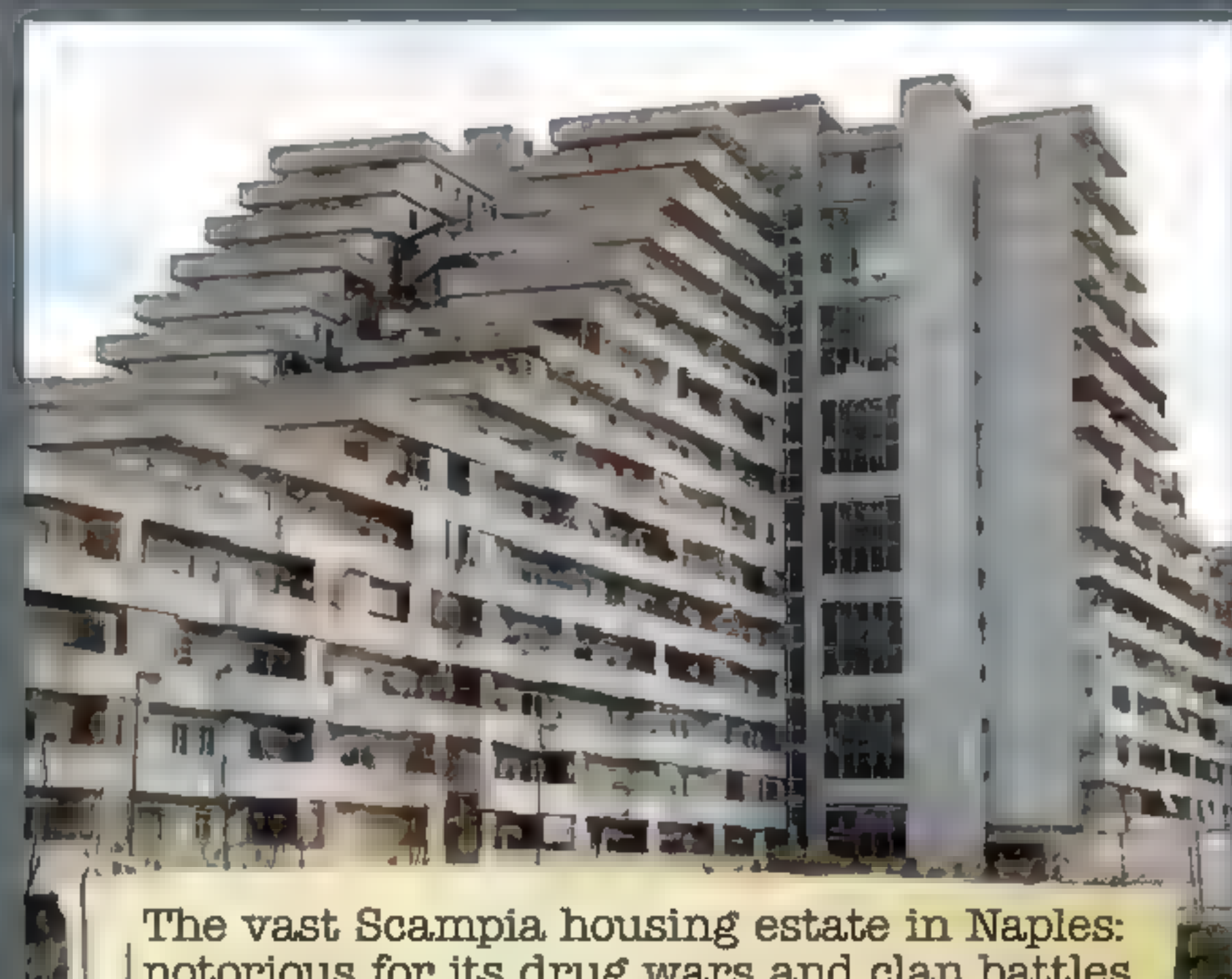
VIOLENCE: 8/10

GLOBAL REACH: 6/10

ACTIVITIES: Drug trafficking, extortion, art theft, protection racketeering, kidnapping, political interference, grant fraud, contract bid rigging, loan sharking, labour union corruption, waste dumping, assassination



Arguably the oldest continuously criminal organisation in the world - Camorra members brought to trial in 1900



The vast Scampia housing estate in Naples: notorious for its drug wars and clan battles between rival Camorra clans



## D-COMPANY

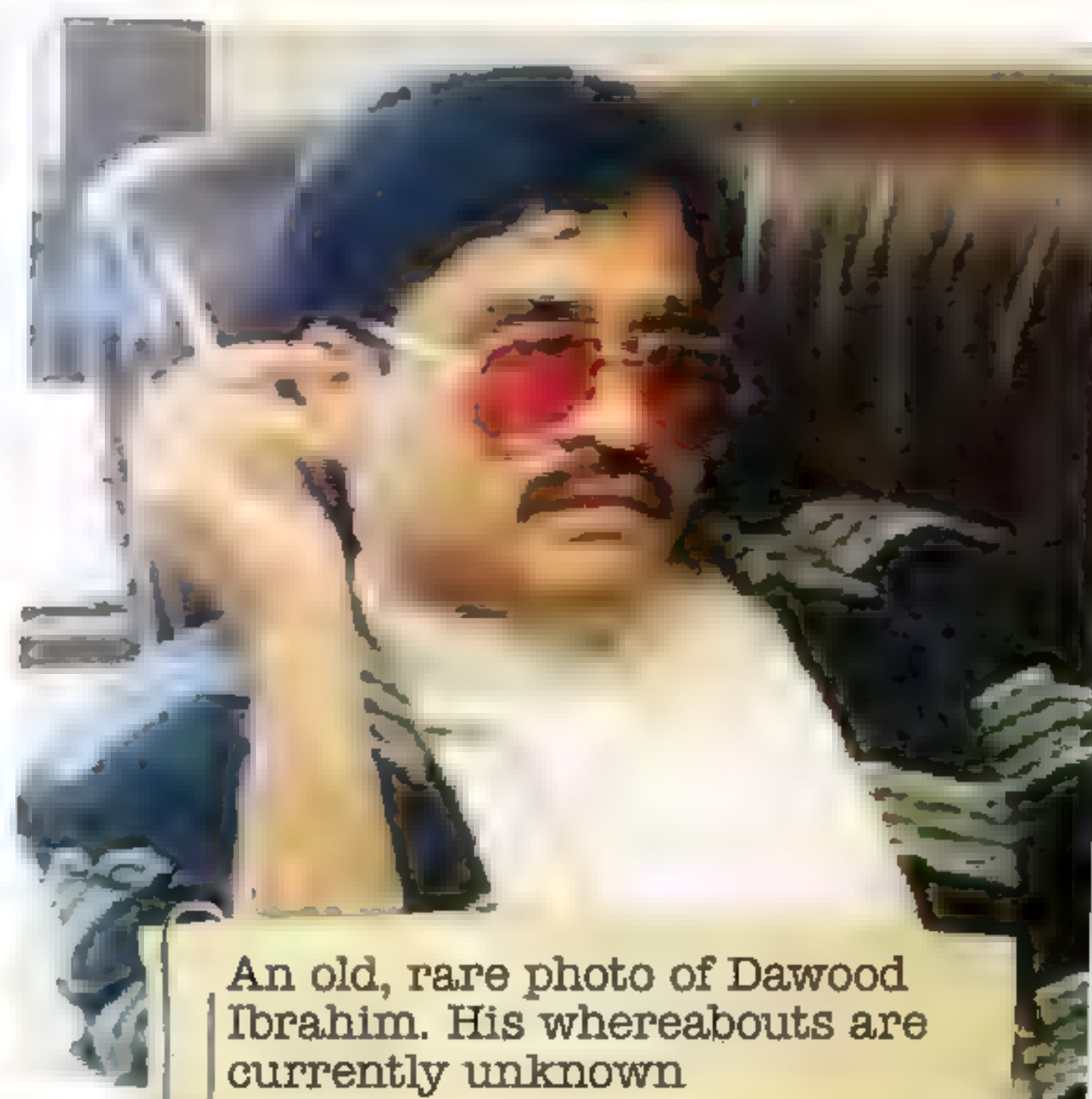
INDIA, 1970S-PRESENT

THE LEADER OF MUMBAI'S MAJOR MAFIA IS ON THE FBI'S TOP 10 MOST WANTED LIST

**D**-Company takes its name from its leader (known as the 'Don') Dawood Ibrahim. Ibrahim started as a Bombay smuggler and rose to become the prominent criminal gang leader in the sprawling city by using extreme violence in street fights. As well as drugs and prostitution, the gang has moved into extortion and investing in the Bollywood movie business. There have been accusations of terrorism links, though there's little hard evidence of this claim. D-Company has also diversified into extorting money from redevelopment projects.

A US Congressional report back in 2015 described D-Company as a "5,000-member criminal syndicate operating mostly in Pakistan, India, and the United Arab Emirates". The FBI have Ibrahim on their Most Wanted list and his current

whereabouts are unknown – Dubai and Malaysia have been suggested as possible locations, though Pakistan is the most likely place he'd hide with some state support.



An old, rare photo of Dawood Ibrahim. His whereabouts are currently unknown

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 6/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 5/10

VIOLENCE: 5/10

GLOBAL REACH: 4/10

ACTIVITIES: Drug trafficking, murder, extortion, gun running, cyber fraud, property investment, cross-border smuggling, political election rigging



The skyline of Mumbai – D-Company's influence is felt everywhere – in every skyscraper and every slum

## UNION CORSE (CORSICAN MAFIA)

FRANCE, 1910S-PRESENT

A LONG-ESTABLISHED AND INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE OPERATING FROM THE FRENCH-OWNED ISLAND OF CORSICA

**T**he Corsican Mafia all began with Paul Carbone and François Spirito and was international from the start, moving into Marseille from Corsica and then out to Asia with the French empire to Vietnam and establishing the legendary 'French Connection' drug-smuggling route.

The loss of French Indochina after World War II forced the Corsican Mafia to diversify into other activities – casinos, slot machine, racketeering – as well as make new international connections across Europe and in Latin America and the USA.

There have been a number of splits in the group, leading to contesting mafias on Corsica itself and in Marseille. In the early 2000s this led to Corsica having the highest murder rate per capita in Europe.

The Union Corse is also deeply involved in the campaign for Corsican independence from France.

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 4/10

ANNUAL INCOME: 3/10

VIOLENCE: 7/10

GLOBAL REACH: 6/10

ACTIVITIES: Racketeering, gun running, money laundering, extortion, kidnapping, car bombing, tax evasion, political terrorism, political ballot rigging, loan sharking, gambling, smuggling



Paul Carbone and François Spirito in the 1930s – around the time they devised the 'French Connection'



The Corsican Mafia's power began in the Marseille docks – where they remain strong to this day





**ABOVE** The Vory v Zakone have moved on from their street thug days – here Spanish cops raid suspected Vory super-yachts in Marbella

## VORY V ZAKONE

**RUSSIA, 1990S-PRESENT**

**THE RUSSIAN MAFIA IS A SHAPESHIFTING BEAST – BUT THE VORY V ZAKONE HAS RULES AT LEAST**

**T**o talk of leading criminal cartels globally and ignore the rise of Russian criminal enterprises is impossible. Yet identifying a group – such as a triad or yakuza unit-style operation – is hard. So consider the Vory v Zakone, or Thieves in Law – Russia's old school and longest-surviving criminal element.

The Vory emerged from the old USSR's prison and gulag system – genuine criminal prisoners rather than political prisoners. They became known for their strong allegiances, codes of behaviour and extravagant tattooing, and cared not for communism and capitalism or Stalin and Putin. They were unapologetically thuggish, astonishingly violent and in a country undergoing massive change.

The older, more brash Vory may have retired or been killed but the next generation have better suits, are more low key and better educated, but are just as ruthless and,

perhaps, highly connected in the corridors of Kremlin power. They've internationalised as Russia's borders have opened up, with operations across both Western and Eastern Europe as well as the US and Canada. Vory operations have also been seen as far afield as Thailand and they're even rumoured to be working with North Korea's Division 39.

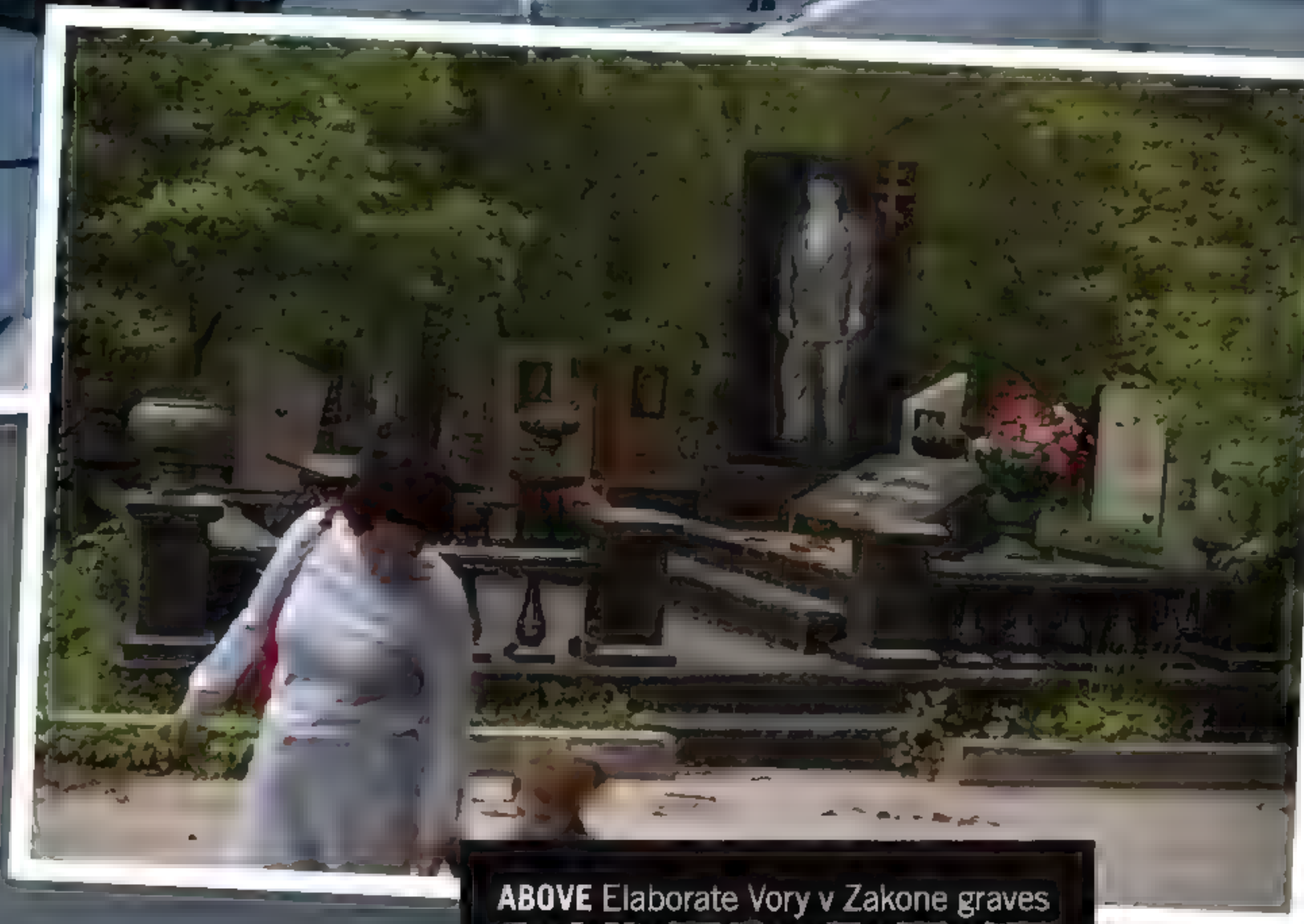
**ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 7/10**

**ANNUAL INCOME: 6/10**

**VIOLENCE: 10/10**

**GLOBAL REACH: 9/10**

**ACTIVITIES:** Drug trafficking, prostitution, kidnapping, tax evasion, murder, gambling, luxury good smuggling, people trafficking, loan sharking



**ABOVE** Elaborate Vory v Zakone graves in Ekaterinburg including the notorious Russian Vory, Mikhail Kuchin



# WAR ON DRUGS

## 100 14 YEARS OF BLOOD, DRUGS & WAR

Mexico's government declared war on the country's drug cartels in 2006. After thousands of deaths and 14 years of shootouts, arrests, deportations and assassinations, it is still far from clear if anything much has been achieved.

Mexico border, risking her life by venturing into cartel country to expose institutionalised corruption, devastation and shocking levels of extreme violence.

## 120 CONTRAS, CRACK AND THE CIA CONNECTION

The United States' Central Intelligence Agency has long been dogged by claims that it has been complicit with overseas drug traffickers.

## 106 KILL TEAM

Brazil's elite SWAT unit is trained and equipped to wage war on the traficantes, but their record is tainted by corruption and brutality.

## 112 BORDERLANDS INVESTIGATOR

For 20 years, Melissa Del Bosque has reported on the narco-traffickers along the US-

## 126 LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The global drug trade remains as lucrative and violent as ever. There are many new players but the game remains much the same.







106



100



100







# 14 YEARS OF BLOOD, DRUGS & WAR



MEXICO'S GOVERNMENT DECLARED WAR ON THE COUNTRY'S DRUG CARTELS IN 2006. AFTER THOUSANDS OF DEATHS AND 14 YEARS OF SHOOT-OUTS, ARRESTS, DEPORTATIONS TO THE USA AND ASSASSINATIONS, IT IS STILL FAR FROM CLEAR IF ANYTHING MUCH HAS BEEN ACHIEVED

WORDS PAUL FRENCH

**M**exico has been in the drug trade a long time – since the 1960s at least. But with demand from neighbouring America forever growing and the new role of Mexico as a transshipment centre into the US for Colombian cocaine, the profits, as well as the risks, rose sharply. Cartels sprouted all over the country and before long were at war over turf, shipment routes and contacts. These were hardened criminal clans – it got very bloody, very quickly.

Quite simply, by 2006 the situation had spiralled out of control. In Mexico a new terrible apex of killing and drug gang violence was wreaking havoc across the country. The nightly TV news showed corpses, gun battles and grieving relatives of the dead on a daily basis. To the north, in the United States, the scale of Mexican-supplied narcotics flooding the streets of America's cities was a major political crisis. The Mexican government was overwhelmed – its law enforcement personnel and armed forces seemed unable to get a grip on the increasingly violent (and super-wealthy), heavily armed cartels that had carved up the country and were in the process of buying up the police, judges and politicians. US pressure was embarrassing the government. If Mexico City couldn't deal with its own problems, then the USA would possibly step in and take care of them for it. The public on both sides of the border demanded something be done. The rubber had hit the road – it was time for action... decisive action. It was December 2006.

For six years, Mexico had been ruled over by Vicente Fox, a businessman and right-wing populist. Fox focused on fixing Mexico's ailing economy. He largely ignored the ongoing narcotics-related crime. During his administration, the then little-known regional drug cartels in Sinaloa, Juárez and the Gulf (the latter based in Tamaulipas state) battled constantly for turf and influence. The body count rose steadily. In 2005 it leapt when 110 people were killed over several months during turf wars between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels. Other cartels split and splintered as the factional fights continued, while new ones were born, such as La Familia Michoacana cartel based in the Michoacán state, which came into existence after a power vacuum in that region.

Fox was ousted as Mexican president and replaced by Felipe Calderón in a bitterly fought and combative election. Ten days after taking office, Calderón, who had run on a 'hard man' law and order ticket, declared 'war' on the cartels – officially the 'Guerra contra el narcotráfico en México'. And he meant it...

## OPERATION MICHOACÁN

If Calderón wanted to show the Mexican public that he was determined to take the war to the cartels, then Operation Michoacán, which began in late 2006, was a clear signal of intent. This was no police raid of the sort that occasionally happened under the Fox administration.

**ABOVE** The launch of la Guerra contra el Narcotráfico in 2006 – Mexican soldiers on the streets of Michoacán





Operation Michoacán was led by 4,000 heavily armed Mexican Army special forces in full kit. For Calderón, the decision to target Michoacán was personal – it was his home state and the site of approximately 500 cartel-related murders in the previous couple of years. By Christmas 2006 the army effectively controlled Michoacán – roadblocks, control points along highways, armed and very public-facing street patrols, raids on suspected drug storage centres and trafficking routes, as well as many, many arrests, including several senior leaders of La Familia. Some of those targeted didn't surrender easily – the Mexican government admits that at least 62 suspected drug traffickers and La Familia cartel members were shot dead.

Still, despite the violence, Calderón was seeing positive approval rating numbers after getting tough in Michoacán. So he turned his attention to the Gulf Cartel. The Gulf Cartel was well-established, having started smuggling booze into the US during Prohibition back in the 1920s. It was also geographically well-positioned, both nudging up against the Mexican-US border and controlling the long stretch of coast down the Gulf of Mexico. However, Calderón knew the Gulf Cartel was tearing itself apart in a fratricidal war. The cartel had relied on a band of highly trained, highly disciplined and highly ruthless special forces for their enforcers, known as Los Zetas. According to a United States Congressional Research Report, the Gulf Cartel did the narcotics trafficking while protected by Los Zetas and left them to have free rein on 'theft, extortion, human smuggling and kidnapping'. Los Zetas have also gone down in historic infamy in the legends of the Mexican cartels for pioneering the now near-universal tactic of exacting revenge by murdering their enemies and rivals and then leaving body parts in public places while posting videos of the 'executions' on the internet.

What Calderón's intelligence told him, though, was that Los Zetas had fallen out with the Gulf Cartel and gone independent. The Gulf Cartel was exposed and vulnerable. So soldiers moved in and captured Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, a major leader of the Gulf Cartel, and, needing to now show Washington, DC that he was serious about taking his war to the cartels, extradited Guillén to the United States. In 2010 the boss of the Gulf Cartel was sentenced to 25 years in prison for money laundering, drug trafficking, homicide and threatening the lives of US Federal Agents.

And so on the campaign rolled, as did major heads as arrests were made, including Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, one



Mexican troops swarm through Michoacán state arresting 'narcotráficantes'

of the leaders of Beltrán-Leyva Cartel (a splinter group of El Chapo's powerful Sinaloa Cartel), and Pedro Díaz-Parada, head of the Oaxaca Cartel in southern Mexico. Soldiers were sent in – Michoacán style – to Tijuana on the US border, home to the Arellano-Félix brothers cartel, and also Ciudad Juárez in central Mexico, home to the Juárez Cartel, which, at the time, was a major cocaine trafficker to America. Tijuana and Juárez were also important in that these were two areas thought to be the worst for police collaboration with the local cartels. To bust the cartels, Calderón had to tackle police corruption, too. In June 2007, he fired 284 federal police officers to weed out that corruption.

## ESCALATION

Of course, any action requires a reaction. It took La Familia Michoacana six months to respond to Calderón's declaration of war. When they did, their gangsters turned the town of Apatzingán in Michoacán into Ground Zero for the drug wars. La Familia had taken a hit – leaders arrested, drug-trafficking routes broken up, couriers in jail. In May 2007 they fought back against soldiers from Mexico's 51st Infantry Battalion in Apatzingán. The heavily armed troops won easily. A lesson was learnt by the cartels: direct engagements with well-trained, well-led, well-armed soldiers would see them wiped out. Their response had to be one of stealth and terror.

Assassinations of senior policemen, politicians and judges were not unknown before the current drug war, but soon accelerated, becoming both more common and increasingly



## NARCOS BY NUMBERS

**45,000**

Mexican soldiers are involved in the attempt to suppress the cartels

**2,837**

Killed in 2007, the first year of President Calderón's offensive

According to the Mexican government, 6,844 non-military people were killed in 2008, and in 2009 9,635 died. By January 2011 the total had grown to 34,612 citizens dead. Some estimates now have the total as high as

**120,000**  
DEATHS BY 2019

**250**  
SKULLS

In 2017 a mass grave was uncovered in Veracruz containing

WHETHER IT'S BANK BALANCES OR DEATH TOLLS, THE FIGURES OF THE MEXICAN WAR ON DRUGS KEEP RISING

Despite 14 years of the war on the cartels, the *Washington Post* estimates that Mexico's drug cartels (and their Colombian cocaine suppliers) generate, launder and remove

**US\$39 BILLION**  
from the United States each year

Several mass graves were uncovered in Tamaulipas holding victims of the Gulf Cartel/Los Zetas war. The largest contained

**177**  
BODIES





## DRUG DEALER OR NARCO?

### NAMES MATTER WHEN YOU'RE A NARCOTRÁFICANTE

The cartels themselves don't like 'dealer' or 'trafficker' – they prefer 'narco', the now ubiquitous term for cartel members. Now 'narco flyers' are left strewn near dead bodies so the public sees clearly who has committed the assassination and knows who to fear.

The term has now spread to 'narcocorridos', a form of traditional Mexican music celebrating the lives and careers of top cartel bosses, and narco hip-hop, to attract a younger and more urban listenership. Much of this is posted to YouTube and other streaming sites as a way to disseminate it as far and wide as possible in Mexico rather than make money from downloads or other sales. There is a beer brand (narcocerveza) named after El Chapo and even a patron saint, Jesús Malverde, (though he has never been accepted by the Vatican!).

Most overtly for ordinary Mexicans is the spread of narco-themed graffiti. This is as much to mark territory as to attract recruits and instil fear into local communities.

Some of the most popular narco-themed propaganda is not necessarily in favour of them. Much narcoliterature – mass-produced novels and paperbacks – openly criticises the narco lifestyle and in particular its glorification of violence and misogyny, as well as the downsides of drug addiction. Similarly, the extension of these books into long-running multi-episode telenovelas – Latin American-style soap operas – is common. And, of course, the televisual portrayal of the cartels has made it to Netflix with the multi-season show *Narcos*, and now more specifically *Narcos: Mexico*.



violent. In Mexico City in May 2008, gunmen killed Édgar Eusebio Gómez, Mexico's federal police chief, and wounded his bodyguards. The next morning, the commander of Mexico City's detective squad, Esteban Robles Espinosa, was killed as he backed his Ford Fiesta off his driveway. That was the cartel's idea of stealth... next came the terror.

That September, during a Mexican Independence Day celebration in the town square of Morelia in Michoacán, grenades were thrown into the crowd. The blasts killed eight innocent bystanders who were not involved in the drugs war and wounded more than 100. It remains unclear if it was Los Zetas or La Familia who threw the grenades, but it was obvious why – out of the hundreds of thousands of towns and villages across Mexico – Morelia had been their target: it was Felipe Calderón's hometown. The newspapers dubbed the Morelia bombing Mexico's first terrorist-style attack in Mexico's current drug war. It would not be the last.

### REMOVE THE HEAD AND THE BODY ROTS

The national response was to take out leaders of the cartels. In November 2009, Braulio Arellano Domínguez, the leader of Los Zetas, was gunned down by the same special forces he'd once been a member of. Arturo Beltrán Leyva, head of the Beltrán-Leyva Cartel in Sinaloa, was shot dead in the streets of Cuernavaca in Morelos state a month later. More cartel bosses killed in shootouts with the army, more arrests, more deportations Stateside for long jail terms. It could have gone on forever – tit-for-tat. Except in early 2011 the stakes went sky high when Jaime Zapata and Víctor Avila Jr, two US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agents operating in Mexico, were attacked by members of Los Zetas. Zapata died while Avila survived a gunshot wound. Washington demanded action. The leaders of Los Zetas were rounded up and jailed.

The direct involvement of US Law enforcement agents in the nation's cartel wars and on Mexican soil was an

**TOP** El Chapo and other Narcos memorabilia on sale in Culiacán, Sinaloa

**ABOVE** Another big boss falls – Francisco Javier Arellano Félix, leader of the Tijuana Cartel, captured by the DEA

**ABOVE LEFT** El Chapo (Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera) – former boss of the Sinaloa Cartel, notorious maximum security prison escapee, and now inmate in the US



A Mexican bar selling El Chapo beer as people dance to narcocorridos star El Komander (Alfredo Rios)

**“ GRENADES WERE THROWN INTO THE CROWD DURING A MEXICAN INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION ”**





# NARCOS: A MAN'S WORLD?

THE WAR ON DRUGS HAS BEEN TOUGH ON WOMEN – AS MOTHERS, COMMUNITY LEADERS, ACTIVISTS AND TARGETS

Watch the images of those cartel bosses arrested – the gunmen, the cops and the soldiers, and the Mexican drug war can look like a very male affair. But the war has taken a particular toll on women. Women are regularly used by the cartels as mules – invariably against their will. Female cops, lawyers and politicians have been targeted for assassination and their corpses mutilated. Rape has been used against community activists resisting the cartels.

However, it was the case of 20-year-old Sinaloa beauty queen Maria Susana Flores Gamez that really hit the global headlines in 2012. Gamez was voted the 2012 Woman of Sinaloa in a beauty pageant. She went on to represent Mexico at a Miss Oriental Tourism International in China. It seems that various members of the Sinaloa Cartel insisted the beauty queen accompany them on nights out, seemingly against her will – but who could say no to a cartel hitman? In November 2012 a gun battle erupted between Mexican soldiers and hitmen including Orso Iván Gastélum, aka 'El Cholo Iván', who worked for the Sinaloa Cartel and whom Gamez was apparently dating. She was in a car with the cartel men and, it was alleged, one of the cartel shooters used her as a human shield to stop being shot himself. She was killed in a hail of bullets.

Though her family and 'El Cholo Iván' have strenuously denied it, Mexican federal prosecutors alleged that Gamez may have actually fired a gun towards the soldiers during the confrontation.



Sinaloa beauty queen Maria Susana Flores Gamez: caught in the crossfire of the Mexican drug war



embarrassment to the Mexico City government, but the war continued and the cartel leaders were arrested one by one. The public got to know them by their nicknames – 'El Mamito', a founding member of Los Zetas; 'El Diego', the purported leader of La Línea, part of the Juárez Cartel; a boss known as 'The Korean', head of Acapulco's Independent Cartel; 'The Monkey', a top boss of La Familia; 'La Rana' ('The Frog'), who led a murderous robbery assault on the Casino Royale in Nuevo León State; 'The Fat One', aka Mario Cárdenas Guillén, the last leader of the Gulf Cartel.

And, talking of nicknames, the horrific social cost to Mexico of the drugs war – the lost children, the ruined families – was brought home with the arrest of 14-year-old Edgar Lugo, aka 'El Ponchis' ('The Cloak'), found guilty of beheading four people. Lugo got just three years in jail, the maximum for a juvenile in Mexico.

## A NEW PHASE

In December 2012, newly elected President Enrique Peña Nieto changed the nature of Calderón's war. Critical of American activities inside Mexico, he wanted to de-escalate the violence, slow down the killings. But it made little difference. He was criticised for his handling of a series of mass kidnappings and shootings in 2014, and the embarrassing escape of the boss of the Sinaloa Cartel, El Chapo, from the country's supposedly impregnable



**TOP** Investigators explore the crime scene where two grenades were thrown into a crowd during Independence Day celebrations in Morelia in 2008

**ABOVE** Mexican President Felipe Calderón – the man who declared war on the drug cartels





Altiplano Maximum Security Prison. The escape made El Chapo a global anti-hero.

Peña Nieto lost re-election to Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018, a centre-left politician, though his defeat was as much to do with failed economic policies as failure to win the war on the cartels. Obrador is an open and self-declared appeaser, offering peace through an amnesty to the cartels in an attempt to halt the drug trade and bring the level of violence significantly down. It is a confusing strategy. Do cartel bosses – those known to have given the orders or carried out assassinations of each other, as well as soldiers and innocent civilians – even qualify for the amnesty? Or is it more an attempt to remove the low level ‘troops’ from the trade and thereby try to undermine it? Obrador believes the Mexican drug business is the most stark symbol of economic inequality in the country, and that it is the victims of the trade and the violence associated with it who should be Mexico’s paramount concern, rather than cartel bosses and their never-ending feuds. Change the narrative, says Obrador.

#### ‘A WAR WITH NO END?’

But neither the drug trade, nor the cartels, are going away quite so easily. The ‘war’, begun in 2006, rages on almost 15 years later on all fronts. More cartel bosses dead in shootouts, more captured and jailed. Those in custody have been



**TOP** The body of a woman who was shot dead near her house in Culiacán, Sinaloa in August 2018

**ABOVE** Mexican Army Special Forces in training for the War on Drugs

handed hefty sentences – Edgar Valdez Villarreal, aka ‘La Barbie’ of the Beltrán-Leyva Cartel, was jailed for 49 years and a month in 2018; Alfredo Beltrán Leyva (whose brother Arturo died in an aforementioned shootout in 2009) was sentenced to life; and a re-captured and deported El Chapo was handed life plus 30 years and ordered to pay \$12.6bn.

In 2019 President Obrador officially declared an end to the Mexican war on drugs. He wants to concentrate on the economy, to highlight other aspects of Mexico than drug trafficking. But ending wars is harder than starting them. The biggest critic of Obrador’s strategy has been Felipe Calderón, the man who launched the war so dramatically in Michoacán in December 2006. Calderón believes that avoiding armed confrontations with the cartels will only lead to them reorganising under new leaders, re-recruiting thousands of new foot soldiers to their ranks, and emerging stronger than ever when, inevitably according to Calderón, a new, even more intense and bloody war on drugs will have to be launched.

**“ PRESIDENT OBRADOR HAS OFFERED PEACE TO THE CARTELS. DO CARTEL BOSSES, WHO HAVE ASSASSINATED BOTH SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS, QUALIFY FOR AMNESTY? ”**







# KILL TEAM

BRAZIL'S ELITE SWAT UNIT IS TRAINED AND EQUIPPED TO WAGE WAR ON THE TRAFICANTES, BUT THEIR RECORD IS TAINTED BY CORRUPTION AND BRUTALITY

WORDS LEIGH NEVILLE

**I**n the pre-dawn light, black-clad men wearing body armour and helmets dash from cover to cover, their rifles up and covering their arcs. Overhead, snipers search for targets from a military helicopter. Armoured vehicles rumble into position. But this isn't Iraq or Afghanistan. It's the urban slums of Rio de Janeiro, host to the 2016 Olympic Games.

The first of these slums, known as favelas (named after a particularly hardy Brazilian plant found in the country's northeast), was born from the mass migration of poor rural Brazilians, many former slaves, following the promise of employment to the then-capital, Rio de Janeiro. Finding themselves unable to afford urban housing, people began building illegally on the hillsides surrounding Rio. The slums expanded in 1960 when the capital of Brazil was changed to Brasilia and an economic downturn saw the exponential increase in urban poor.

Denied basic utilities like sewerage and running water, the favelas soon became a breeding ground for violence and crime. Successive governments attempted to alleviate the pressure with forced evictions and relocation to public housing projects that, without the necessary basic infrastructure, became favelas themselves.

During the 1980s rise of the cocaine trade, the favelas were controlled and fought over by criminal gangs, known as











# DRESSED TO KILL?

BOPE OFFICERS HIT THE STREETS WITH MILITARY-GRADE KIT

The operator wears a US-style MICH helmet that will defeat all common handgun calibres and provide some protection against rifles and shotguns. As an example of the overt machismo within the unit, black berets adorned with the skull logo are often preferred over the far more sensible helmet. His eyes are protected by goggles and the face mask obscures the operator's identity to lower the risk of any repercussions against his family.

The .40 PT24/7 fires a heavier bullet from a 15-round magazine. BOPE versions, carried here in an SAS style drop holster, feature an accessory rail allowing a weapon light to be fitted.

The weapon of choice for the US military, the M4 can fire either single shots or three round bursts from a 30-round magazine. Its compact size and telescoping stock make it ideal for urban combat. It can also be equipped with a range of weapon lights, grips and optics, like the EOTech 'red dot' sight seen here, allowing each BOPE operator to customise his weapon.

The operator wears a Kevlar vest that incorporates a heavy ceramic trauma plate in front and back to protect the vital organs from heavy calibre bullets. It features attachment points to allow the operator to mount his magazine and stun grenade pouches directly to the vest.

Each operator carries an issue Wotan combat knife made specifically for BOPE. Many further customise their knives by adding the units' skull and pistols insignia to the pommel.

BOPE wear intimidating black military battle-dress-utilities in the manner of many police tactical units. The operator also wears kneepads and gloves as added protection against broken glass.

traficantes and milicias, who enforced law in the absence of authority. They became no-go areas for the civilian police.

Of the city's 6.3 million people, some 1.4 million now live in Rio's 1,000 favelas. During the last decade, Brazil has maintained one of the highest murder rates in the world, with an average of over 50,000 homicides annually (of which under 10 per cent are solved). The cities of Brazil are consistently rated among the most violent places on Earth. In 2014, 114 policemen in Rio alone were killed while on duty. To counter this, each Brazilian state has two police forces: the military police conduct patrols and affect arrests while the civil police conduct investigations.

Against this murderous backdrop, the Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais (Special Police Operations Battalion) or BOPE was formed. Initially developed in 1978 as a hostage rescue unit for the Polícia Militar do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Rio military police), the unit was firstly known as the Núcleo da Companhia de Operações Especiais (Special Operations Company Nucleus) or NuCOE. It soon expanded and was finally re-christened BOPE in 1991.

Hostage rescue remained one of their responsibilities (now handled by a BOPE sub-unit), but with its increased size, BOPE took responsibility for the majority of tactical policing tasks within the Rio district. With over 470 officers, including a number of female officers, BOPE is the face of paramilitary policing in Brazil.

The unit uses a range of resources more commonly seen in war zones, including aerial sniper teams who can fast-rope from helicopters; huge armoured trucks known as 'Caveirão' or 'Big Skull'; and an impressive range of military small arms and equipment including AR10 Super SASS marksman rifles, HK21 light machine guns and both fragmentation and stun grenades. Their dress and demeanour is one of a military Special Forces unit. Their tactics too are closer to those once seen on the streets of Fallujah or Baghdad. The unit is extensively drilled in Close Quarter Battle technique.

When faced by roadblocks, BOPE use military demolitions to clear pathways (in 2010 even tracked armoured personnel carriers were deployed). Their approach to their targets are covered by designated marksmen carrying scoped rifles. Like British troops in Afghanistan, they even monitor gang 'walkie talkies' using ICom scanners. But the major drug gangs they target – and there are an estimated 200,000 traficantes in Rio alone – are equally well-armed with assault rifles, grenade launchers and .50 sniper rifles. Several years ago, a police helicopter was even shot down by a heavy machine gun.

The traficantes sell the drugs but the milicias or militias – corrupt police and government officials – control much of the organised crime in the favelas, including loan sharking and protection rackets. They also supply the traficantes with their military-grade hardware. Another weapon in their arsenal is the street kids used by both gangs as lookouts. The children use fireworks as an early warning system before pelting the officers with stones to slow their approach. Not surprisingly, BOPE operations regularly end in gunfire.

The unit's fame has been bolstered by a best-selling book, by two then-serving BOPE officers, that went on to become wildly popular films, *Tropa de Elite* (or *Elite Squad*) and its sequel, *Elite Squad: The Enemy Within*. Meanwhile, pop songs about the unit have topped the local charts ("BOPE are coming to get you" cries the chorus).

Along with the infamous skull emblem worn by unit members, the black berets, the custom combat knives and their "Skull!" war cry, the unit encourages a culture of brute





force in arrests. They are quick to shoot and continue until the target is immobile – a far cry from usual police practices. Those tactics result in high casualty numbers; in the decade to 2014, a staggering 8,466 Rio citizens were killed by police. Most were young black males between the ages of 15 and 24.

Along with high-risk operations to capture armed suspects, the unit is regularly called upon to conduct so-called ‘pacification’ of the favelas. Spurred on by security concerns prior to the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Rio, these operations began in 2008 and were designed to deny the favelas to the drug gangs and milicias. Before pacification, BOPE would conduct individual raids to capture or kill targeted traficantes – now the tactic was to win back territory from the gangs.

A typical pacification operation begins with a ‘cordon and search’ with BOPE operators establishing an outer perimeter to capture any escaping gang members before forcing entry to the targeted locations. The operation will be supported by the ‘Big Skull’ trucks that BOPE operators use as mobile cover and by their snipers in helicopters overhead. Once any gang members are arrested, the operation is handed over to the community police or Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP).

The UPP or Pacifying Police Unit are intended to become the local police authority, fostering relationships with the favela residents. Along with the UPP come representatives from the Department of Labour, who aim to find employment for those formally employed by the drug gangs. Garbage is collected, schools are opened and any gang tags and graffiti

are erased, all of which are intended as signs of the benefits of working with the government (amusingly, salesmen hawking satellite television packages are also soon in evidence, making the most of previously untapped markets).

Widespread corruption within Brazil’s police is commonly acknowledged by even its own members. Conversely, part of the mythology surrounding BOPE credits them as incorruptible, at least in terms of receiving ‘arregos’ or pay-offs by criminals. Many allege however that BOPE participates in darker activities, including torture and extra-judicial killings.

Allegations against the Brazilian special units of extra-judicial killings are nothing new, but BOPE has attracted more than its fair share, particularly in relation to killings officially reported as “resistance followed by death”. BOPE has also been implicated in the use of the so-called ‘Troy’ tactic that sees a police operation conducted into the favelas, complete with armoured vehicles and helicopters. During the commotion, a small team of operators stay behind, hidden and awaiting the return of a targeted criminal. Once the police leave, and gang members return, the covert team ambushes and kills them.

**“ THE MAJOR DRUG GANGS THEY TARGET – AND THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED 200,000 IN RIO ALONE – ARE EQUALLY WELL ARMED ”**

**BOTTOM** A unit trains for an arrest, although officers don't hesitate to go for the kill





# DEATH TALLY

BOPE'S QUESTIONABLE DRUG WAR STRATEGY HAS TAKEN ITS TOLL ON BRAZIL'S PEOPLE

Civilians are often caught in indiscriminate BOPE shooting. Ten-year-old Eduardo de Jesus Ferreira was shot in the head during a favela raid. When his mother tried to run to him, a BOPE officer told her "he would kill me too".

'Rescues' are the removal of BOPE victims to hospital, ostensibly in an effort to save their lives. Human Rights Watch notes many have a "gunshot wound to the brain" and argue this is more about destroying evidence.

Father-of-six Amarildo de Souza was tasered, suffocated and water-boarded before he was 'disappeared'. Reports state that a bundle "not incompatible with that of a corpse" was seen on CCTV being loaded into a BOPE truck.

Extra-judicial killings aren't rare. A victim of a 2005 BOPE shooting arrived at the morgue after being shot between the eyes "naked, washed and with ink for fingerprints on the tips of his digits" according to the coroner.

A former member acknowledged that "no BOPE soldier ever leaves headquarters without his plastic bag" used to suffocate prisoners. Another admitted torture was "part of the daily life of the Brazilian police".



## “ THE HEAVY-CALIBRE RIFLE ROUNDS USED BY BOPE CAN EASILY PENETRATE SHANTIES, LEADING TO INNOCENTS BEING STRUCK ”

BOPE shootings are rarely adequately investigated, allowing crime scenes to be tampered with and any inconvenient forensic details to be destroyed. Public fear of police retribution, particularly in the favelas, means that few witnesses are willing to come forward. Bodies are often disposed of by the officers involved – the victims of such shootings become a statistic known as 'the disappeared'. Their numbers do not feature in the official homicide tallies.

Along with the shooting of wounded or captured suspects, BOPE has been accused of the torture and abuse of suspects. This ranges from excessive force used during arrest to interrogation techniques that involve physical harm to the suspect. Some are simply beaten to death.

Remarkably, many inhabitants of Rio and of the favelas themselves, agree with the employment of such tactics. According to the UN's Human Rights Commission, residents "fear high crime rates and [...] perceive that the criminal justice system is too slow to prosecute criminals effectively." BOPE's heavy-handed actions are therefore widely supported by the city's residents.

However, civilians within the favelas are also at risk during BOPE operations. The heavy-calibre rifle rounds

used by BOPE and the gangs can easily penetrate through any number of the poorly constructed shanties, leading to innocents being struck by stray gunfire from both sides. In July 2012, during an ambush in the Quitanda Costa Barros favela, a ten-year-old girl was hit and killed by a BOPE or traficantes bullet.

In the chaotic close confines of the favelas, mistaken identity shootings are also a common occurrence, with young males the typical victims. It's been alleged that BOPE cover up such shootings by claiming the victims were gang members or by using 'drop guns' to give the appearance of an armed criminal. Indeed, some argue that inhabitants of the favelas have more to fear from BOPE than from the traficantes or milicias.

One example is a case investigated by Amnesty International in 2005 of a 17-year-old shot in the head by a marksman on a 'Big Skull' truck. The boy's body was recovered by BOPE, hung from a hook on the vehicle and driven through the favela with BOPE officers demanding a monetary ransom to return the body to the family. During the same operation, a 46-year-old grandmother was fatally shot outside her store by someone within the 'Big Skull'. In another case, a BOPE sergeant was shot and killed by armed robbers. His colleagues avenged his death by shooting dead eight people – some traficantes, some innocent civilians.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission in 2009 explained the problem as one of "extra-judicial executions [...] committed by police who murder rather than arrest criminal





suspects, and also during large-scale confrontational 'war'-style policing, in which excessive use of force results in the deaths of suspected criminals and bystanders."

In the latest figures available (2013), according to Human Rights Watch, police units in Rio including BOPE were responsible for the killing of 362 of its citizens in the first six months of the year alone. Concerns about police shootings eventually resulted in the São Paulo state government ordering their military police not to remove bodies from the scenes of shootings involving their officers. Incredibly, police shootings immediately dropped by a third.

Despite their brutality, many claim the BOPE pacification operations have been successful in reducing both the violence in the favelas and the power and influence of the gangs. Indeed, even BOPE has modified its tactics in an attempt to lower the risk of civilians being caught in the crossfire, with a process known as 'war with prior warning', giving the gangs notice that an operation is about to commence and providing the opportunity to surrender or leave the area.

BOPE's excessive use of force is both a result of the incredible levels of violent crime in Rio and a self-affirming aspect of their own cultural identity. That Brazilian society largely condones and in many cases supports BOPE's tactics can only be viewed as a reaction to statistics that state one in five murder victims globally is Brazilian. As Robert Kennedy once said, "Every society gets the kind of criminal it deserves. What is equally true is that every community gets the kind of law enforcement it insists on."

**ABOVE** Just one of thousands of traficantes caught with a fortune in cocaine. It's common practice for suspected dealers to be tortured



## DEADLY SYMBOLISM

BOPE'S FEARED SKULL INSIGNIA IS SYMBOLIC OF BOTH THE EXTREMES OF POLICE VIOLENCE AND PART OF THE POPULAR BOPE MYTHOLOGY

Featuring a dagger-pierced skull superimposed on top of a crossed pair of flintlock pistols, the emblem more resembles something worn by an outlaw biker gang than by a police unit. BOPE stress instead that the dagger signifies victory over death and the pistols simply show their lineage as they are the official insignia of the military police, BOPE's parent organisation.

Critics argue that the insignia and the unit's war cry of "Caveira!" ("Skull!") are part of the problem, and see the symbolism as a direct reflection of the tattoos and tags of gangs like Red Command, the Third Command and Friends of Friends. These are major criminal syndicates operating within Brazil's favelas with a left-wing political background, dealing in drugs and the arms trade. It reinforces the view that BOPE are simply the most heavily armed gang in the favelas, albeit a government-sanctioned one.

The violence inherent in the logo also helps to normalise the use of often excessive violence against suspects, including questionable shootings and extra-judicial killings. BOPE openly admit they see themselves as fighting a war and that different tactics are required against the traficantes.



WAR ON DRUGS



# BORDERLANDS INVESTIGATOR

FOR 20 YEARS, MELISSA DEL BOSQUE HAS REPORTED ON THE NARCOTRAFFICKERS ALONG THE US-MEXICO BORDER, RISKING HER LIFE BY VENTURING INTO CARTEL COUNTRY TO EXPOSE INSTITUTIONALISED CORRUPTION, DEVASTATION AND SHOCKING LEVELS OF EXTREME VIOLENCE

WORDS BEN BIGGS





FROM THE  
REAL  
**CRIME**  
ARCHIVES  
NOV 2018

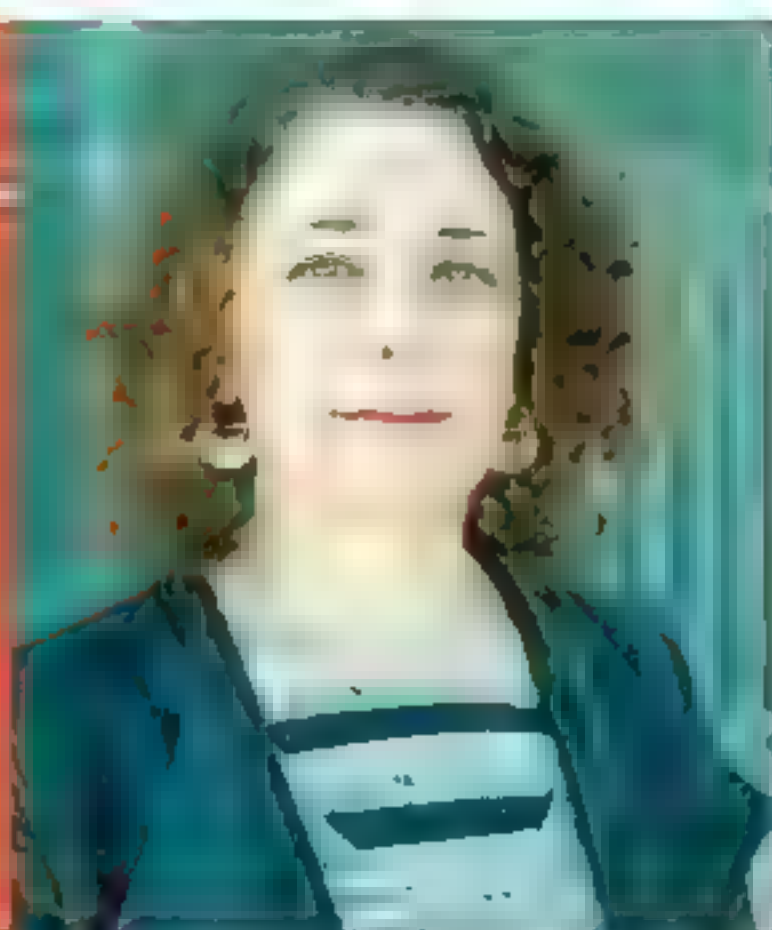






**BIO MELISSA DEL BOSQUE**

Melissa Del Bosque is a reporter investigating crime along the border. She has written for the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. She is currently based in San Diego, California.



**M**exico has been a haven for the narco-traffickers for decades, ever since the power shifted from Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel in the 1980s. Before 2006, an uneasy truce between the Juárez, Sinaloa and other cartel affiliates meant that, while corruption and violence still existed as a part of billion-dollar narcotics industries, most people knew where they stood. Then, Sinaloa declared war on Juárez and a kind of hell broke out in the Mexican borderlands that only someone who has lived through the worst civil wars could relate to. This wasn't just criminals shooting it out in the streets like Prohibition gangsters. The power and wealth the cartels wielded meant the corruption ran deep, through local law enforcement, government and even the army. Policemen and politicians were assassinated, bodies hung by the dozen from bridges, people disappeared and mass graves were discovered as entire villages were emptied to clear the way for the cartels.

The Juárez Valley fell under martial law but as the Zetas, who were aligned with the Juárez cartel, were made up of former Mexican special forces operatives, they were able to corrupt the army. Drawing on their military contacts,

**ABOVE** \$10,000 or more in cash has to be declared at the US-Mexico border, so many multiple cash drops had to be made for the Zetas to get money into the US. The FBI was able to photograph some of these drops taking place



**“IT'S A CONFLICT THAT HAS A LOT TO DO WITH ORGANISED CRIME AND POLITICS BEING ONE AND THE SAME IN MEXICO”**

**RIGHT** A gold and silver medallion seized from a Zetas member, emblazoned with the cartel logo, is on display at the Mexican Secretary of National Defense headquarters in Mexico City



they approached commanders to secure large caches of military-grade weapons, rocket launchers and explosives. In return, the Zetas could be recruited by the army for dirty, extrajudicial jobs. This paramilitary force of black-masked, highly trained and experienced killers now distinguish themselves with their extreme brutality among the cartels already known for employing torture and murder as a part of their business model.

Melissa Del Bosque's career as a reporter investigating crime along the border has followed the escalation in narco-terrorism, occasionally taking her into the cartel heartlands and 'the deadliest place in Mexico'.

**Where does your interest in crime across the US-Mexico border come from?**

I've been writing about the US-Mexico border for the last 20 years, and when the drug war started getting really bad... I mean it really started in 2006, especially on the cities just on the other side of the Texas-Mexico border – Juárez and Nuevo Laredo. You'd have heard a lot about Juárez but Nuevo Laredo is quite bad. That is due to these guys, the Zetas who I write about, because that's their home turf.

I'm originally from San Diego [in California], another border town, but I've been here in Texas for the last 20 years. So when the violence started spiking and getting really bad, as a border reporter I started having to cover it. And that's how I started writing about the drug war and writing about crime in Mexico. It was just unavoidable at that point because there was so much fighting going on.

**How much crime spillover is there from the Mexican border towns into the US? Does it feel like a frontier?**

This is something that surprises people a lot, but there isn't much spillover. The cities on the US side have very low crime, because one reason is there is a lot of law enforcement there. Another reason for the violence in Mexico is that it's political. Political parties controlling territory, and politicians being in bed with organised crime. It's like a mafia situation, like you'd see in Sicily or something. It's a homegrown conflict that has a lot to do with organised crime and politics being one and the same in Mexico. Corruption's a big reason for a lot of the problems there.





#### How easy is it for the cartels to infiltrate US law enforcement?

It's very much part of the business model for the cartels because they make so many billions of dollars. A lot of the more expensive drugs like cocaine come across the bridges and tracks, they don't come across the river. So it really depends on the cartels getting US agents and officers to wave them through with drugs.

There is a certain percentage of US agents who are going to go with the money, because the cartels are offering them \$100,000 for a wave. It's a lot of money to turn down... it's one way for the drugs to come in, and it couldn't come in without corruption. It's a big part of the equation in terms of getting things across the river.

**ABOVE-LEFT** Informants recorded Zetas rigging horse auctions for record-breaking sums of money in the US. José Treviño can just be seen in the white Stetson on the right

**ABOVE-RIGHT** Treviño's Lexington ranch, Zule Farms in Oklahoma, where the Zetas moved their quarter horse racing business

**BELOW** Southwest Stallion Station advertises Tempting Dash, the most famous horse in the Treviño stables, for breeding at around \$5,000 a time



#### How much time did you spend in Guadalupe, in the Juárez Valley, for your 'Deadliest Place in Mexico' article?

I spent a long time speaking to people who lived there and were in exile in Texas, living just across the river. So I did a lot of interviews and a lot of research, and then I went to the town just for the day, because it's not really safe to stick around. I drove in with another journalist, a photographer, and then went through the houses that have been burned down and found all kinds of artefacts – you know, people's land titles or wedding albums. It was really sad, because you could tell they'd been killed or they'd left in such a hurry that they couldn't take their most treasured things with them. They'd been burned. So we just stayed for the day, but that was enough. It's a small, rural place, but we got a sense of it pretty quickly because everything was pretty devastated.



## Tempting Dash

By Champion Sire  
**First Down Dash**

Out of Broodmare  
of The Year  
**A Tempting Chick**





**“YOU’RE TALKING TO THE MAYOR, WHO’S TELLING YOU EVERYTHING IS FINE, BUT... EVERYTHING’S BEEN RAZED TO THE GROUND”**

**There were still people living there though?**

Yeah, mostly elderly people who pretty much spend all their time indoors, kind of locked up. We went to interview the mayor, and that was very surreal because he told me he had won an award for it being one of the best cities in the country... he had a big trophy on his desk. He invited me to come to the parade three days later! Since then that mayor ended up going into exile as well.

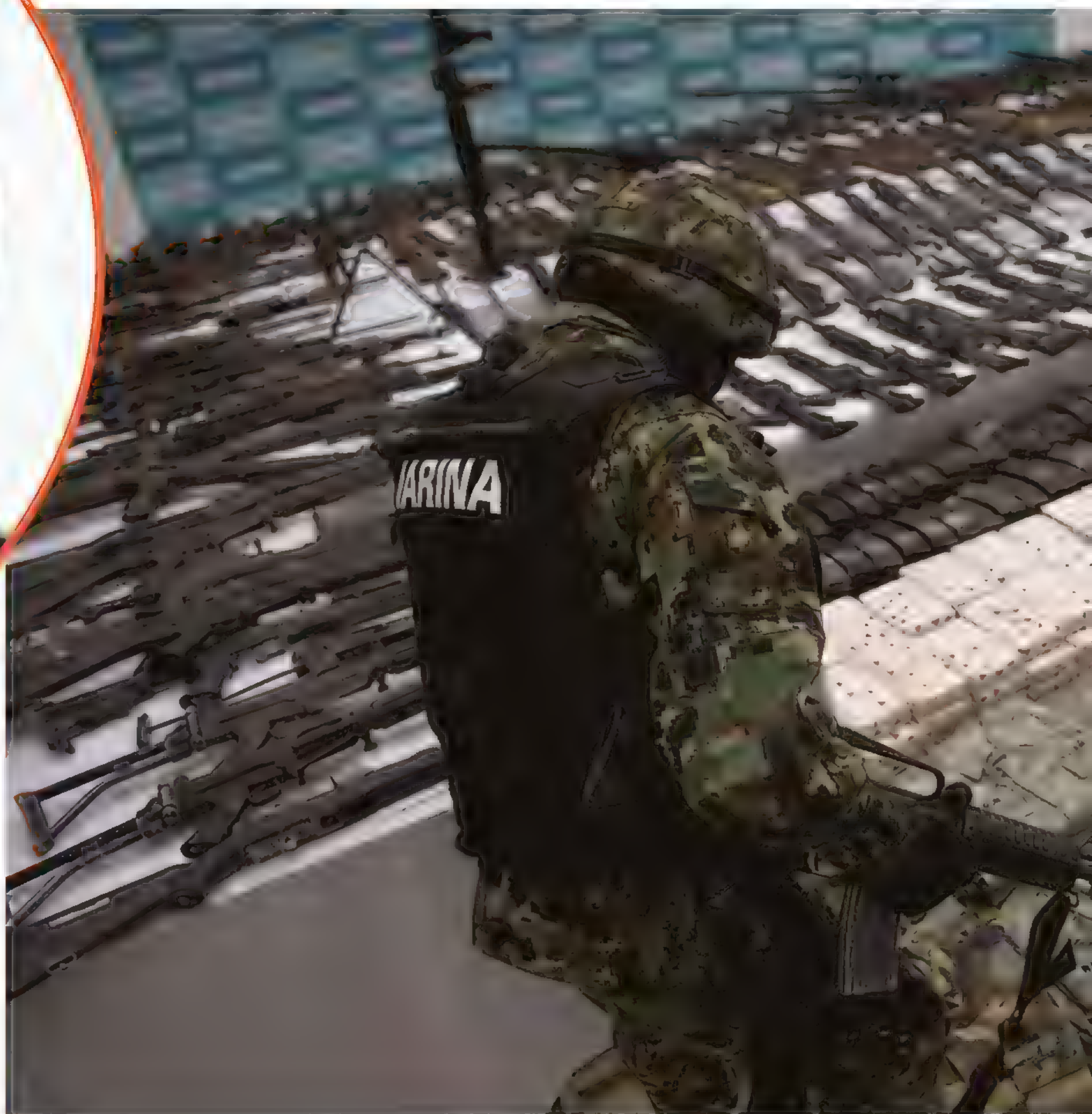
**What was the atmosphere like?**

It was very tense. It was also very surreal because you’re talking to the mayor, who’s telling you everything is fine, but you’re looking around and can see that everything has been basically razed to the ground. Most of the population has left, and then I was asking about a home that I wanted to visit – and the whole town isn’t very big – but first he said he didn’t know where it was. It was like he was afraid to tell me where it was and didn’t want to go with me. It was just a few blocks away from the mayor’s office. It was very strange and sinister.

I was thinking about how I was going to portray this in the story, and it really had to be first-person because I had to talk about what I was seeing versus what I was hearing from officials. It was two completely different worlds.

**Is this situation quite common on the Mexican side of the border?**

In some places it is, yes. And it fluctuates, you know. Things will get better and then bad again. The Juárez Valley is still in bad shape, it hasn’t improved to the point people can go home and live there again. There are people who live in the town just on the other side of the river, they can see their old



**ABOVE-LEFT** Z-40, Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, former boss of Los Zetas, who oversaw a period of unprecedented cartel violence in Mexico

**ABOVE-RIGHT** At the height of Z-40’s power, Mexican marines seize 200 rifles, ammunition, Zetas uniforms and 200 kilograms of cocaine (street value of around \$12 million) in Mexico: a small drop in the flow of contraband across the border

town in Mexico but they can’t go back. They’re literally that close, where they can stand on the hill, see the church and everything but they can’t go back to their own town.

**Your book, *Bloodlines*, is a very intricate account of the takedown of Los Zetas bosses: do the US agents Lawson and Perez exist?**

Oh yeah, they’re real agents. I had to use a pseudonym for Perez because she works at the border and she’s got family in Mexico also. But Scott [Lawson] lives in Tennessee so he doesn’t feel, from a security perspective, as vulnerable as her. But they’re both agents in the FBI.

It’s a nonfiction book. The main thing that was really helpful was that the prosecutors from the case shared all the exhibits from the trial with me, so I had access to wiretaps and photographs that were taken when Scott was undercover. I had all of this evidence to draw from to recreate the scenes, including actual dialogue from the wiretaps. It would have been incredibly difficult without having access to the evidence that was used in the trial.

**It must have been a phenomenal amount of information to work through.**

Yeah, I also went through several thousand pages of trial, to recreate the trial scenes and the history of the Zetas and their takeover of the Mexican border. Quite a few members of the Zetas are now in jail and have testified in various trials, here in Texas and various parts of the country. So I was able to access their transcripts to put together the history of the





**ABOVE** Following the arrest of José Treviño Morales and seizure of his property, the Zetas' assets were auctioned off, including 'A Dash of Sweet Heat' – one of dozens of race horses owned by Tremor Enterprises LLC

Zetas, their rise to power and infiltration of quarter horse racing in the US.

**Why did they use quarter horse racing as a means of laundering drug money?**

[The Zetas] had so much money it had really become a burden, because they had to launder it to use it. They had to get it into the banking system somehow. Quarter horse racing is a very, very popular sport in Mexico as well as here in the United States. It's also a status symbol. The Treviño brothers had racehorses and they raced a lot in Mexico, they would go to different races and bet millions of dollars against other cartel kingpins who have their own horses. So that's been a very popular pastime among the cartels for many years.

So Miguel Treviño had the horse ranches and quite a few pedigree horses in Mexico. And his brother José lived here in the United States as a US citizen, didn't have a criminal record and was not on law enforcement's radar. So they came to the conclusion that they would start a racing empire in the US and use José as a front for it. In the US they have several million-dollar races, so I think they thought, "Let's get all the best horses and we'll win all those races."

**One of the things that struck me about *Bloodlines* was the level of bureaucracy and the inter-agency US operation. Is this standard for any US government employee working on a case against the cartels?**

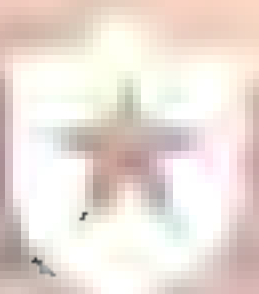
Yeah, especially at the border, where there are so many different agencies focused on the border and focused on drug

## TAKING DOWN THE ZETAS

### THE FBI HIT THE DEADLY CARTEL WHERE IT HURT — IN THEIR POCKETS

Miguel Angel Treviño Morales, known as Z-40, took over Los Zetas in 2010. His ascent to the top spot caused a rift in the cartel and sparked an era of horrific tit-for-tat murders worse than anything that had come before it. North of the Mexican border in Texas and the southwest, the cartel boss and associates were investing huge amounts of money in quarter horse racing. His little brother José Treviño Morales was a US citizen with no criminal record at the time, so made a perfect conduit for laundering the vast sums of cash that came from Mexico. José poured millions into a ranch and horses under 'Tremor Enterprises LLC', in a scheme that would marry the Zetas' need for clean cash with a favourite pastime. Law enforcement agents operating out of Laredo, Texas, managed to infiltrate this operation, which culminated in a carefully orchestrated raid on a ranch and some stables in June 2012. A year later José was sentenced to 20 years in prison for money laundering. A month after that, Z-40 was captured by Mexican marines in a Black Hawk helicopter and taken to a maximum-security prison. In 2015 the last free Treviño Morales brother, Omar, was also captured, putting an end to a brief legacy of the fraternal leadership within Los Zetas.





**ABOVE** Forensics teams work in the Juárez Valley desert in March 2018, where the bones and bodies of dozens murdered by the cartels and by corrupted soldiers lie in shallow graves

## WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

### HOW DID THINGS GET THIS BAD IN MEXICO?

Smuggling has existed in Mexico ever since there has been a border. 100 years ago it was marijuana and weapons, then alcohol for a short period during Prohibition. As the popularity of heroin, cocaine and prescription drugs increased in the US from the 1950s onwards, the Guadalajara cartel became the de facto power in Mexico. It was a natural partner for Pablo Escobar's cocaine empire, funnelling tons of white powder more easily through Mexico's well-worn smuggling routes to the US than the risky Caribbean corridor.

Guadalajara made a fatal mistake in 1985 when it captured, tortured and murdered DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena. This prompted a vigorous DEA crackdown that ultimately split Guadalajara into smaller cartels that have evolved into the factions we see today. In the meantime, the increasing appetite for cocaine has put billions of dollars into the pockets of the Mexican drug lords, giving them access to military-grade hardware, allowing them to hire corrupt soldiers to commit terrible atrocities and bribes to those with military and political power to turn a blind eye.

trafficking, cross-border crime. Just in the federal building in Laredo, where these two agents were stationed, there is a federal law enforcement agency on each level: the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] being the kings of the border and at the very top, and you've got the FBI another rung down and then the Department of Homeland Security. So they're all sort of jockeying for the same cases, and this is such a high-profile case... Miguel and Omar Treviño are two of the most wanted men on the border of both countries, with millions of dollars in bounties on their heads.

So for the DEA to see the FBI getting some skin in that game, their institutional ego was... I mean they were up in arms. There's real jostling when there's a really high-value, high-profile case like that, because it attracts the attention of Washington and it gets funding from Congress, and so forth...

#### **A way of climbing the career ladder for individuals.**

Absolutely. And for this rookie FBI agent to come from another state, brought onto this case with such high-profile characters... there was a lot of, "What's this guy doing here? What does he know about the border and the cartels, this guy from Tennessee?"

#### **And the investigation involved the IRS, too.**

The IRS [Internal Revenue Service] criminal investigators were so cool, they were like accountants with guns. You



ATTN  
C/L CARTEL DE JIHALCA

**"WE DO NOT WANT  
MORE DEATHS"**

MEXICAN NEWSPAPER *EL DIARIO* PUBLISHED AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CARTELS IN 2010

really don't want to mess with them. They're the ones who go through all the paperwork in a money-laundering case, do all the painstaking work of connecting the drug money in Mexico to the purchase of horses in the United States through all these different straw buyers and front companies.

They don't do that many drug-trafficking cases anymore so it was interesting that they have this Waco Treasury Task Force with Steve Pennington, who was a long-time investigator who's just recently retired. But he was still doing these drug-trafficking cases for the IRS and they just left him to it. He had a handful of people he had chosen to work with him – they just had a lot of institutional knowledge about these drug families and drug routes. So when they got involved the case really started to move.

**You don't really think of pen-pushing accountants when you think of busting narcotraffickers.**

Ultimately it's the tax agents that get them. That's how Al Capone was taken down, by a tax agent who got access to race track records. Everybody thinks it's the bust and the guns, but typically it's the guys wearing glasses behind the scenes, with a pen – unravelling the money trail [she laughs].



**“THE IRS [INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE] CRIMINAL INVESTIGATORS WERE SO COOL, THEY WERE LIKE ACCOUNTANTS WITH GUNS”**

**ABOVE-LEFT** A letter from rival cartel Sinaloa to the residents of Práxedes in the Juárez Valley, threatening ordinary cotton farmers with violence unless they leave: the strategy was to clear the village in order to minimise interference with their operations

**ABOVE-RIGHT** Houses still lie in ruins in Allende, Mexico, long after the Zetas sent their soldiers in to murder and burn villages to the ground

**Over the last few decades, the power of the**  
**narcotraffickers and the violence they perpetuate has**  
**escalated. Now rival cartels, vigilante groups, the army,**  
**the police and seemingly every level of authority are all**  
**implicated. It's institutionalised – do you see an end?**  
Not in the near future, but I think it will get better  
eventually. What happened at the turn of this century was  
that everything changed – with globalisation, with the drug  
business, our relations with the US and Mexico... everything  
is in flux. Things have got really bad and I think they could  
get even worse, but I think the pendulum will swing the other  
way as well. I have to believe that it will get better eventually.

With the new president in Mexico [Andrés Manuel López Obrador] – he takes office on 1 December [2018] – he has forums going on all over the country for truth and reconciliation. They're trying to get a sense of how many people have disappeared, how many have been killed. They're trying to start a dialogue about what's been happening in Mexico for the last few years and how they could improve things, like they did in Argentina and places in South America with the Dirty Wars.

Mexico had a dirty war too in the 1970s but they never acknowledged it because they never had an opposition party in power – they've had the same party in power for the whole of the last century, basically. So it's never been in anybody's interest in politics to bring out all the skeletons and talk about it. But now they actually have somebody who could do that. This is going to unleash a lot, they have so much to deal there with reform and everything else. We'll see – it's a tall order!



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**CRACK**  
**the**  
**CIA**

**THE**  
**BIG DEMONSTRATION**  
**SAT. FEB. 22<sup>nd</sup> 12:00 NOON**  
**AT LOS ANGELES CITY HALL**

**STOP THE C. I. A. FLOW OF**  
**DRUGS IN OUR CITIES**

Links between the CIA and the drugs trade has long been made, sometimes leading to protests





# CONTRAS, CRACK AND THE CIA CONNECTION

THE US CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY HAS LONG BEEN DOGGED BY CLAIMS THAT IT HAS BEEN COMPLICIT WITH OVERSEAS DRUG TRAFFICKERS

WORDS DAVID CROOKES

**W**hen US President Richard Nixon declared a "war on drugs" in June 1971, he expressed concern that addiction and abuse had become a national emergency. He told Congress that it was important to disrupt supplies in the narcotic-producing countries of Latin America. Vital, also, to rehabilitate drug users in the United States.

As such, much money was spent on public health programs at home, and efforts were made to curb heroin addiction among Vietnam War soldiers. But this particular battle has seldom proven to be smooth. Quite aside from unproven allegations that Nixon sought to associate hippies and black people with drugs to disrupt those communities, there have long been claims that the CIA's involvement hasn't always been whiter than white either.

One of the most damning set of allegations was made in August 1996 in the *San Jose Mercury News* when journalist Gary Webb presented the findings of a year-long investigation in a three-part series called 'Dark Alliance'. The story centred on the drug cartels in Nicaragua, and what would emerge caused the CIA to panic, then counter, as it sought to reassure the public that it had done no wrong.

To explain, Webb had been speaking to Oscar Danilo Blandón Reyes, a Nicaraguan-born drug and arms trafficker who had fled to the United States following the Sandinista National Liberation Front's overthrow of Anastasio Somoza Debayle's regime in 1979 – a revolutionary act that had ended a ruling family dynasty spreading back some 43 years.

Power had fallen to the socialist Junta of National Reconstruction, but Blandón – who had been a director





of agricultural markets during the time of the Somozas – opposed the change and went on to raise cash for an opposing right-wing rebel Contra group called the Nicaraguan Democratic Force. This organisation was created by the CIA and Argentina in a bid to bring together exile groups. It was backed by President Ronald Reagan.

Webb alleged that Blandón, along with other anti-communist rebels, were trading in crack cocaine – a smokeable version of the addictive recreational drug that offers highs well in excess of its less-processed form. In the mid-1980s, crack cocaine had become widely used in the poorer, predominantly African-American areas of some of the United States' largest cities, from New York City to Los Angeles to Miami. Webb claimed the CIA was responsible for the epidemic.

Such allegations were not entirely new. They'd emerged numerous times during the mid-to-late 1980s, and they always centred on the hunch that the CIA was allowing drugs to flood America's impoverished streets so that money could be raised in support of the Contra rebels. It prompted the release of a detailed report in 1989 by the then-Senator John Kerry. Prepared by the subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations, it took three years to put together and it spanned more than 170 pages. The report acknowledged that the Nicaraguan Democratic Force "did move Contra funds through a narcotics trafficking enterprise and money laundering operation". "There is also evidence on the record that US officials involved in assisting the Contras knew that drug smugglers were exploiting the clandestine infrastructure established to support the war and that Contras were receiving assistance derived from drug trafficking," it continued.

"Instead of reporting these individuals to the appropriate law enforcement agencies, it appears that some officials may have turned a blind eye to these activities." And yet the report did not conclude that the CIA was directly implicated in drug dealing.

Certainly, this was not, it would seem, a repeat of the apparent trafficking of heroin around the meeting borders



In 1996, CIA director John M Deutch said there would be a full investigation into allegations that the agency was involved in the flood of crack cocaine on the streets of Los Angeles but denied the CIA assisted or turned a blind eye



Panama leader and former CIA intelligence asset General Manuel Noriega was captured following the US invasion of his country in 1989

## A DARK HISTORY

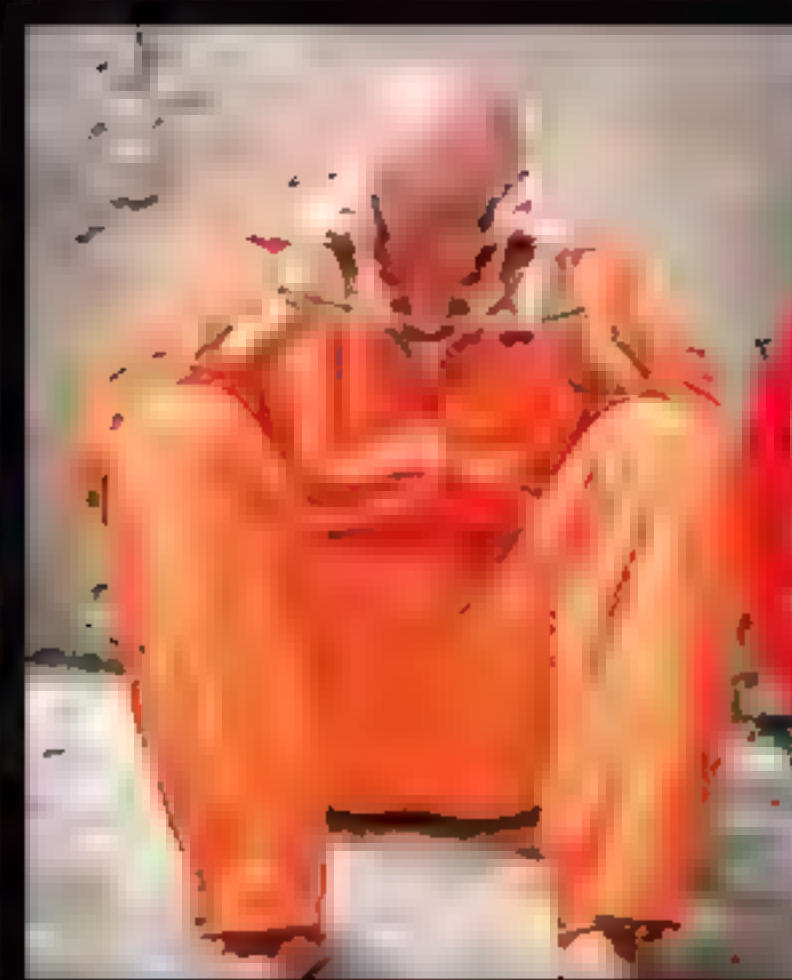
THE CIA HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF OTHER ALLEGED ACTS OF CRIMINALITY SINCE ITS FORMATION IN 1947



Guevara was among a number of people who the CIA believed to be better off dead

### THE HIT LIST 1967

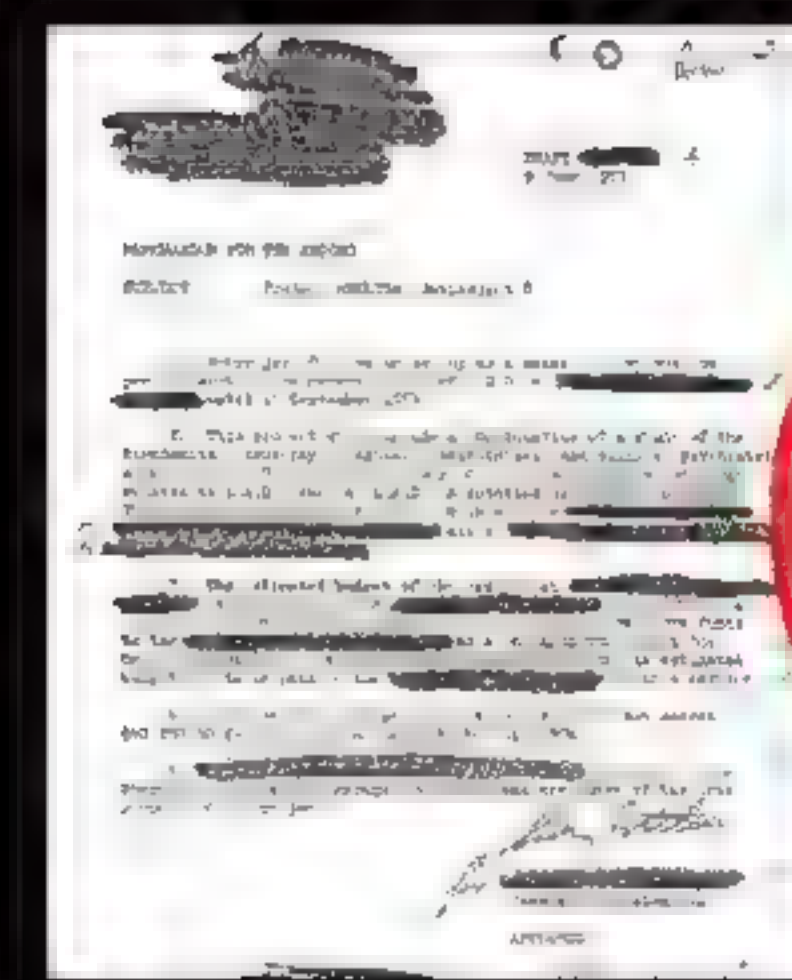
The CIA has had an indirect hand in a number of assassinations, supporting or being aware of plots to overthrow foreign leaders. In 1967, communist revolutionary Che Guevara was captured by CIA-assisted Bolivian forces. He was interrogated by CIA operative Félix Rodríguez before the Bolivian high command ordered his execution.



Details of how the US treated its detainees at Guantanamo Bay were released in the CIA Torture Report of 2004

### TORTURE AND RENDITION 2002

Four months after the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, President George W Bush signed a memorandum that dropped the Geneva Conventions in relation to the interrogation of al-Qaeda suspects. CIA interrogators made use of water boarding, sleep deprivation, rectal feeding and enforced standing.



Experiments in behaviour control were funded by CIA involving the drug LSD

### HUMAN EXPERIMENTATION 1953

Project MKUltra surreptitiously tested drugs like LSD and used techniques, such as hypnosis and sensory deprivation, on US and Canadian citizens to discover their long-term effects on the brain for more effective future interrogations. The program was initiated by the then-CIA director Allen Dulles and it continued until 1973.





Crack cocaine devastated predominantly black communities across the USA during the 1980s



The Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) was the largest of the Contras and backed by the CIA

of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar in the 1950s when Air America planes were said to be transporting opium from mountain villages to a CIA asset. In any case, opium trading was entirely legal within the so-called Golden Triangle at that time and it helped the local economy. Given the subsequent war on drugs and the damage narcotics were having on US society, however, any hint of CIA involvement was bound to inflame.

And so it was that Webb stepped in with his investigation, and it was not only notable for its resulting allegations but for the way in which it was delivered: it was the first major story to break online, supplemented by documents and audio recordings.

As well as drawing upon revelations made by Blandón, Webb's articles focused on the former Los Angeles drug dealer Ricky 'Freeway' Ross and drugs smuggler Norwin Meneses. Webb claimed the "CIA's army", as he repeatedly called it (to much criticism), delivered cocaine to Ross for distribution, using the money that was paid to finance the Contras. He also said the Senate subcommittee investigation "ran into a wall of secrecy at the Justice Department". It soon caught the imagination of readers.

The CIA was certainly worried about the emerging stories. A subsequent – now declassified – government report stated: "The charges could hardly be worse". It said it had been caught unaware by the series because Webb had not called the agency for comment. But it also expressed relief that the claim the CIA was responsible for destroying black communities was being challenged by "prominent blacks". There was praise for journalists questioning the chronology of events and the articles sceptical of the CIA-cocaine connection.

Those articles were written by journalists on other newspapers who had immediately jumped on the story. Rather than back the allegations, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and others punched holes in the story. They picked up on the amount of cocaine that had apparently found its way to the US from Nicaragua: 100 kilos a week by the mid-1980s, which was far too little to have posed the problems that it was said to have caused. They noted Webb's hyperbole and a lack of evidence to support claims.

The following year, the executive editor of *The Mercury News*, Jerry Ceppos, said that Webb's report fell short of the newspaper's standards and he also pointed out that Blandón had testified to not sending any money to the Contras after 1982. Alleged profits of \$54 million were also questioned and deemed mere estimates, and Ceppos said that the article implied CIA knowledge when "we did not have proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship".

Webb quit. He published a book on the allegations and wrote that he had "never believed" there was a "grand CIA conspiracy." Yet in 1998, journalist Nick Schou said the CIA had carried out an internal investigation and acknowledged the Contras and fundraising partners were allowed to smuggle drugs into the US for more than a decade. "Ironically," he wrote in his book, *Spooked: How the CIA Manipulates the Media and Hoodwinks*



The Iran-Contra affair took place under Reagan's administration at a time when there was an arms embargo on Iran.

### SALE OF ARMS 1985

The CIA was involved in a covert operation that saw arms being sold to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages. It became known as the Iran-Contra affair, since the payments that were taken were handed to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels. More recently, the CIA has shipped weapons to Jordan for use by Syrian rebels.



© Linda Napiewoksi

### DOMESTIC ESPIONAGE 1967

Concerned that foreign influence was behind growing unrest in the US, the CIA worked on what became Operation CHAOS, which tapped phones and infiltrated student groups, among other methods, of US citizens in the United States. This was in violation of the CIA's charter, which was to focus only on overseas targets.

CHAOS resulted in thousands of files on individuals linked to at least 30,000 organisations.





Hollywood, “the CIA’s own internal report revealed far more agency complicity with drug dealers than ‘Dark Alliance’ had even suggested.”

Even so, Webb committed suicide on 10 December 2004, his work discredited. But his own story was later told in the 2014 movie *Kill the Messenger*, and a confidante of Nicaraguan dealer Rafael Cornejo called Coral Baca also told the *Huffington Post* that the Contra leader Adolfo Calero knew how the money he had been receiving was being earned – reinforcing the Contras’ connection with drug trafficking. Again, there is no concrete proof that the CIA was complicit in all of this but it shows the allegations simmer nonetheless.

It’s also worth revisiting the report by Kerry, which showed that the State Department had contracts with four companies controlled by drug traffickers to provide goods and service to the Contras in 1986. It emerged that pilots flying supplies on behalf of the CIA had backgrounds in drug trafficking. What’s more, in 1991, the then-senator Gary Hart wrote to Kerry with information divulged by Tosh Plumlee, a pilot who claimed to have transported weapons to Cuba in the 1960s on behalf of the CIA. “Mr Plumlee stated that he had personally flown US-sponsored covert missions into Nicaragua,” Hart stated.

He later continued: “Mr Plumlee raised several issues including that covert US intelligence agencies were directly involved in the smuggling and distribution of drugs to raise funds for covert military operations against the government of Nicaragua. He also explained the existence of maps showing landing strips in Mexico, central Costa Rica, Louisiana, Arizona, Florida and California where drugs were off-loaded and replaced by Contra military supplies.

One thing’s for sure, Webb’s investigation was not the only time the intelligence agency had been discussed in connection with drug trafficking operations – and that’s quite apart from the comings and goings in the Golden Triangle. Indeed, we can discuss the small matter of General Manuel Noriega, Panama’s notorious dictator, who had been on the payroll of the CIA for many years. As stated in Tim Weiner’s terrific book, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*, the politician had regular meeting with William J Casey, who was Director of Central Intelligence between 1981 and 1987.

Noriega had grown immensely rich, in great part through the trafficking of drugs. But he’d also received cash from the CIA while he was the head of Panama’s intelligence, allowing for the creation of US listening posts in the country. Having Noriega onside made it easier to assist forces sympathetic to the US in Nicaragua and El Salvador. His activities – which included murder – certainly did not deter the CIA from valuing him as an asset. After all, the relationship ensured a steady flow of information about the Sandinista government in Nicaragua as well as the Cuban government and yet, as a US Senate subcommittee pointed out, he was a foreign leader “able to manipulate the United States to the detriment of our own interests.”

There were also tensions aplenty – Noriega was selling US intelligence to Cuba and *The New York Times* revealed his involvement with illicit money laundering and drug activities in 1986 – and yet the CIA long resisted attempts to overthrow him. He was even indicted in Florida in February 1988 charged with ten counts of racketeering, money laundering and cocaine smuggling. Yet he remained in power through to 1989 despite his connection with the CIA now being very well known.



The US-backed Contra rebels fought against the Sandinista Popular Army (pictured)



## “ HIS ACTIVITIES – WHICH INCLUDED MURDER – CERTAINLY DID NOT DETER THE CIA FROM VALUING HIM AS AN ASSET ”

**ABOVE** Former Panama dictator Manuel Noriega was on the CIA payroll but he was imprisoned for drug trafficking and died in 2017, as these headlines in the country’s newspapers report

The tables only turned when President George H W Bush – who denied meeting Noriega during his election campaign despite photographic evidence – ordered an invasion backed by 28,000 troops. Noriega was captured, trialled and imprisoned in the United States before being extradited to France then Panama, with Donald H Winters, who was the CIA’s station chief in Panama for two years from June 1984 testifying for his defence. Noriega eventually died in jail in 2017, aged 83, yet his involvement in drug trafficking was not untypical.

Central America was a hotbed for such activity and multiple countries found themselves under the spotlight. The former Honduran narcotics smuggler Juan Matta-Ballesteros, for instance, was found to be in control of the airline SETCO which began operating in 1981. It was one of six companies discovered to be owned by convicted or



# TEACHING TORTURE

THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS HAD A CURRICULUM THAT WAS UNLIKE MOST OTHER EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS ON EARTH

Up until 2000 there was a school with an alumni that read like a who's who of dictators and assassins – an establishment widely criticised for the human rights violations of a number of its graduates under the guise of improving ties and promoting democracy.

It was called the US Army School of the Americas and it existed for 54 years, training more than 63,000 Latin American military personnel and police in jungle warfare as well as the fine art of interrogation.

In 1996, the Pentagon declassified seven training manuals used by the 'students'. They recommended torture techniques and contained material found to be similar to older CIA manuals dating back to the 1960s.

Initially based in Fort Gulick in Panama before moving to Fort Benning, Georgia, the School of the Americas was attended by Panama's dictator Manuel Noriega, as well as the former Honduran chief of staff Humberto Regalado, who was linked to Colombian drug trafficking. Argentine ex-president Leopoldo Galtieri, who served during the last military dictatorship, was also a graduate, and some of the alumni were responsible for assassinations and massacres.

Yet the school defended itself, saying it was aiming to promote democracy and a respect for human rights among soldiers. President Jimmy Carter, meanwhile, felt it was in the national interests of the United States to educate militarily and granted an opportunity to promote favourable attitudes towards the US.

Many officers taking part in President Dwight D Eisenhower's Overseas Internal Security Program – an initiative to create secret police in countries such as El Salvador, South Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Peru and South Korea – were also trained at the School of the Americas. Some say its replacement, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, continues much the same work.



Protestors sought to close the School of the Americas and they want its successor to shut too

Gary Webb's work was quickly discredited by rival journalists but his story about the CIA supplying drugs to the Contras to sell in the US caused a major stir

ABOVE The cargo airline Southern Air Transport was known as a front company for the CIA and it was used to aid the Contras in Central America

suspected drug traffickers linked to the Contras, the others being Frigorificos De Puntarenas, Ocean Hunter, DIACSA, Vortex and Hondu Carib.

A CIA report said all of these, with the exception of Ocean Hunter, were being used to supply humanitarian aid to the Contras through the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office. Matta was a key figure on the Colombian cartel scene and he ended up being extradited to the United States in 1988 on drug trafficking charges.

Venezuela was not without incident either. Weiner wrote a report for *The New York Times* in 1993 in which government officials admitted that the CIA had shipped close to a tonne of near-pure cocaine to the US three years earlier as part of an anti-drug initiative. President Reagan wanted such programs to be set up across Central and South America to cut the supply of cocaine and this particular plan involved the CIA's station chief James Campbell and CIA agent Mark McFarlin.

The aim had been to win the confidence of a Colombian drug cartel, by infiltrating the gang and allowing the drugs an easy pass through customs in the hope of identifying key targets. But since US law enforcement agencies were

not informed, the drugs accidentally made their way into the United States through Miami International Airport, with the consignment eventually sold on American streets. It turned out the CIA top command knew about the plan and that the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had objected. The whole thing blew up in an embarrassing TV exposé on the US show, *60 Minutes*.

Drug trafficking connections such as these are why there has long been underlying suspicion (a spokesman for the Chihuahua state government in north Mexico told *Al Jazeera* that the CIA and other international security forces much prefer to manage the drug trade rather than fight traffickers).

It's accepted that the CIA will link up with cartels and individuals involved in the drugs trade if it is in the interest of national security, whether to protect assets or to get to the root of particular problems. There was a time when the DEA would even require permission from a local CIA station chief in order to investigate a drug trafficker. But, as many have discovered, it's a controversial subject and not all the allegations end up sticking. The situation is anything but cleanly cut.



ABOVE Ricky 'Freeway' Ross was named in journalist Gary Webb's investigation into alleged links between drug trafficking and the CIA





# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

THE GLOBAL DRUG TRADE REMAINS AS LUCRATIVE AND  
VIOLENT AS EVER. THERE ARE MANY NEW PLAYERS  
BUT THE GAME REMAINS MUCH THE SAME

WORDS ROBERT WALSH

Three tonnes of cocaine worth 400 million euros was seized in Livorno, Italy in February 2020



**M**any of the old cartels have gone, destroyed by law enforcement, each other or themselves. The Cali Cartel, Norte del Valle Cartel and others have long been put out of business. Their leaders are dead, serving decades or even centuries behind bars or existing as fugitives. The drug business, however, remains as strong and lucrative as ever.

That doesn't mean the old guard don't still run some of their operations from prison, but the days of Escobar openly flaunting his wealth and its source are over. The global drug trade has also attracted new players and new products. Individual cartels and gangs rise and fall as they have always done, but the future remains bright for their impending replacements.

Recent political and civil unrest in Central and South America has provided fresh opportunities for a new breed of trafficker. Old cartel territories in Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Nicaragua have seen chaos erupt domestically, severely straining their ability to maintain order. Conveniently situated for traffickers, Brazil remains one of the biggest drug markets in the world and a main shipping point for cocaine smuggled into Europe.

The US has downgraded the drug problem in Central and South America, especially since the War on Terror began in 2001. The American Mafia, once a prime target for agencies like the FBI and DEA, suffered severely until then. Today it is rebuilding and is still involved in the drug business. Sammy 'The Bull' Gravano, underboss to John Gotti until betraying him in the early 1990s, recently finished a lengthy sentence for dealing ecstasy after going into the Witness Protection Program.

They still officially hold a policy of 'Deal and die' in which drug-dealing is punishable by death, an edict in force since 1957. In practice, Mafiosi are dealing as much as ever. The rule is enforced sporadically and unless Mafiosi are indicted bosses often look the other way while still taking a percentage. Still firmly established across the US and with extensive ties to traffickers worldwide, they remain major figures within the drug business.

Just as the fight against global terrorism has seen the American Mafia begin to re-establish itself, the global drug trade has also slipped down Washington's list of priorities. That's not to say that the drug trade is going entirely under Washington's radar, but resources that would otherwise go to fight it have been re-allocated against groups like ISIS and the remnants of Al-Qaeda.

Among others, Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel has risen to the challenge. Active since the 1960s and led in part by the notorious Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán, Sinaloa has taken Cali's mantle as the most notorious, powerful cartel on the planet. A major force in cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, marijuana and methamphetamine trafficking, Sinaloa is also one of the main suppliers of fentanyl to the US drug market and is firmly established across the country. Sinaloa currently leads the global drug trade and its dominance, though threatened to some degree, is in little doubt. Under the

**“ A MAJOR FORCE IN COCAINE AND ECSTASY, SINALOA IS ALSO ONE OF THE MAIN SUPPLIERS OF FENTANYL ”**





leadership of Ismael Zambada Garcia and Guzman's sons Alfredo and Ivan, Sinaloa remains a major player. El Chapo's incarceration has done little to prevent that.

Mexico's Juárez Cartel, former allies of Cali, are Sinaloa's biggest local rivals. Based just across the border from El Paso, Texas, the Juárez Cartel has been at war with Sinaloa for years. Known for extreme brutality, Juárez is a major player in the US cocaine market and deals heavily in other drugs. Like Sinaloa, the Juárez Cartel remains a powerful group looking to build and consolidate in a changing world.

Brazil's First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital or PCC) has taken full advantage of the country's status as the largest smuggler of cocaine into Europe. In fact, the PCC is smuggling most of it. It has allied itself with the 'Ndrangheta, one of Italy's lesser-known but deadliest criminal groups. The PCC-'Ndrangheta alliance has earned huge amounts for both groups, allowing a blizzard of powder to go from Brazilian factories to European noses with only limited success for law enforcement.

Within Colombia itself, the paramilitary Army of National Liberation (ELN) has existed for decades. Today there is almost no part of Colombia's drug trade without ELN influence. Its leaders are veterans of decades of political and criminal violence, having survived nearly five decades of attacks from right-wing paramilitaries, the US government and rival political groups in Colombia. Relatively new to large-scale drug trafficking, the ELN's other rackets make it the largest, most powerful criminal group in Colombia today.

Russian gangsters have long been involved in the drug trade, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union. With communism gone the Russian Mafia have branched out into many different rackets, including drug trafficking, arms dealing, murder-for-hire, large-scale fraud and extortion. Their reach is global and they have a major role in trafficking cocaine, heroin and other drugs.

The market in the Far East remains largely under the control of Chinese and Japanese gangsters. The triads and yakuza have extensive ties to the drug trade and show no signs of giving them up, it's simply too lucrative. The 14K and Tai Huen Chai triads are heavily involved in heroin trafficking and selling chemicals used to make methamphetamine and ecstasy. In the US the triads also control large parts of the ketamine market.

The yakuza also has extensive ties to the drug trade, especially methamphetamine. While the American Mafia outwardly forbids its members to deal drugs the yakuza's attitude is more relaxed. Some clans allow drug-dealing and some don't. Those who do stand to make huge profits, often smuggling drugs into the US via Hawaii and smuggling American guns to Japan at considerable profit.

Their opponents are law enforcers worldwide, often working with help from intelligence agencies. With differing priorities, languages, laws and rules to work within, differences of opinion are common. In November 2019 US President Donald Trump threatened to designate some Mexican cartels terrorist groups, an idea that was eventually dropped.

Trump also threatened to order US troops to conduct anti-cartel operations within Mexico itself without clearance from the Mexican government. Mexico's president was outraged, in turn declaring he would preserve Mexican sovereignty even against US forces. With even his own cabinet members voicing private opposition and existing anti-drug co-operation jeopardised, Trump delayed his policy, but did not explicitly abandon it.

With so many organisations acting against the drug trade it might seem that seizing lots of drugs in a single raid is a major victory for anti-drug agencies. Whether such seizures actually are major victories is more debatable. Supply and demand is the only law traffickers respect. Losing a few tonnes at a time simply isn't all that important to them.



ABOVE Mexican cartels market newer drugs like fentanyl and methamphetamine, but old ones like heroin and cocaine are still popular

## WUHAN, THE WORLD'S FENTANYL CAPITAL

CORONAVIRUS HAS IMPACTED SEVERELY ON THE GLOBAL DRUG TRADE. IRONICALLY IT HAS MOST IMPACTED WUHAN'S DRUG TRADE WHERE THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC BEGAN

With the coronavirus pandemic affecting every area of life, the global drug trade has been no exception. With lockdowns and international transport restrictions enforced worldwide, profits are down, prices for fashionable drugs are up and competition for available markets is fierce. Any group with a ready supply of scarce merchandise stands to make huge profits while the pandemic restricts smuggling and limits available supplies.

Ironically the drug trade in Wuhan, epicentre of coronavirus, is also said to be suffering badly from it. Wuhan's underworld has long been producing both fentanyl and precursor drugs used to manufacture both it and methamphetamine. In China, precursor chemicals are traded entirely legally and very cheaply, much to the displeasure of the US government. With China – an authoritarian state – able to enforce lockdown

measures aggressively, supplies from Wuhan have been severely disrupted.

China also has a rigid anti-drug attitude. One of the world's leading practitioners of capital punishment, it makes no bones about regularly executing drug traffickers. Before coronavirus, Wuhan was the illicit fentanyl capital of the world, with Mexico's cartels its biggest customers. Currently Wuhan's ability to produce and ship drug-related products is greatly restricted. In turn, Mexican cartels have had problems producing enough fentanyl and meth to meet demand.

Whether Wuhan's drug trade will recover from coronavirus is debatable. If travel restrictions last within China or further afield, customers will look elsewhere for supplies or start making their own. There will always be somebody looking to fill that vacuum legally or otherwise.

Fentanyl has flooded the US in the last 20 years. Wuhan has provided both fentanyl and chemicals to manufacture it







## “ AS TODAY’S TRAFFICKERS ARE KILLED, IMPRISONED OR FORCED INTO HIDING, NEW ONES WILL SURELY TAKE THEIR PLACE ”

The reason is simple: For every shipment seized, dozens and maybe hundreds get through. Today’s traffickers know that; their predecessors knew it and so do law enforcement. Large seizures have been made for decades with only limited or no effect. Provided demand remains high enough there will always be suppliers. As today’s traffickers are killed, imprisoned or forced into hiding, new ones will surely take their place just as they replaced cartels like Cali and bosses like Pablo Escobar.

Demand for new products like methamphetamine and fentanyl has yet to supplant traditional drugs like heroin and cocaine. Fentanyl is certainly an increasing problem but has yet to become a scourge. Other opioids have also increased in popularity, making fentanyl far from the only opioid problem. Traffickers once realised they could earn more money for less product smuggling heroin and cocaine instead of opium and marijuana. Now heroin could be replaced by fentanyl and other opioids for the same reason.

Methamphetamine is rather more established and has a large customer base, especially in the US. The Mexican Mafia and outlaw bikers like the Pagans and Hell’s Angels produce and sell huge amounts. Outlaw bikers also smuggle drugs into the US from Canada, sometimes trading them for weapons more easily found in the US. Trading weapons for drugs is a recurring factor in the American drug market.

The future of the global drug trade will be very different from its past but one thing remains certain: Like any other business, legitimate or otherwise, it will exist as long as consumers demand its products. Regardless of law, morality, unrest, pandemics or other social factors, the drug trade is here to stay... and probably flourish.



## OLD RACKETS, NEW MERCHANDISE

COCAINE, HEROIN AND MARIJUANA WERE MAINSTAYS OF THE DRUG TRADE FOR DECADES, BUT NEW DRUGS LIKE FENTANYL AND METHAMPHETAMINE ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY PROFITABLE

Two reasons for the Cali Cartel moving from smuggling marijuana to cocaine were potency and profit. A plane load of cocaine sells for far higher wholesale prices than a similar amount of marijuana. By the time retail dealers dilute it for sale on the streets a kilo of ‘cut’ cocaine is worth some 30 times more than its pure equivalent. It is also far less pure and the additives can be potentially lethal.

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is some 100 times stronger than morphine. A plane load of fentanyl is worth far more than the same amount of morphine or heroin at street level. Invented in the 1960s for medical use, fentanyl is potentially lethal even in tiny amounts and overdoses are extremely common. It is also relatively easy for illegal labs to make, far easier than the complex process of refining opium into morphine and then heroin.

Methamphetamine is also easy to make illegally. Criminal groups worldwide employ ‘cooks’ to produce the drug, which is far stronger than standard amphetamine and far more addictive. Cheap and easy to make, ‘meth’ has become a mainstay for some dealers, especially outlaw bikers in the United States.

Just as traffickers once saw greater profit potential in heroin and cocaine, some see greater margins in fentanyl and methamphetamine. Other traffickers disagree, viewing death rates among fentanyl users as reason to stay away. The foreseeable future of heroin and cocaine trafficking remains secure even while drugs like fentanyl and methamphetamine grow in popularity.



Methamphetamine is a major earner for Mexican traffickers, with illegal factories producing up to 200 kilos daily



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# NARCOS



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HOW 'EL PATRON'  
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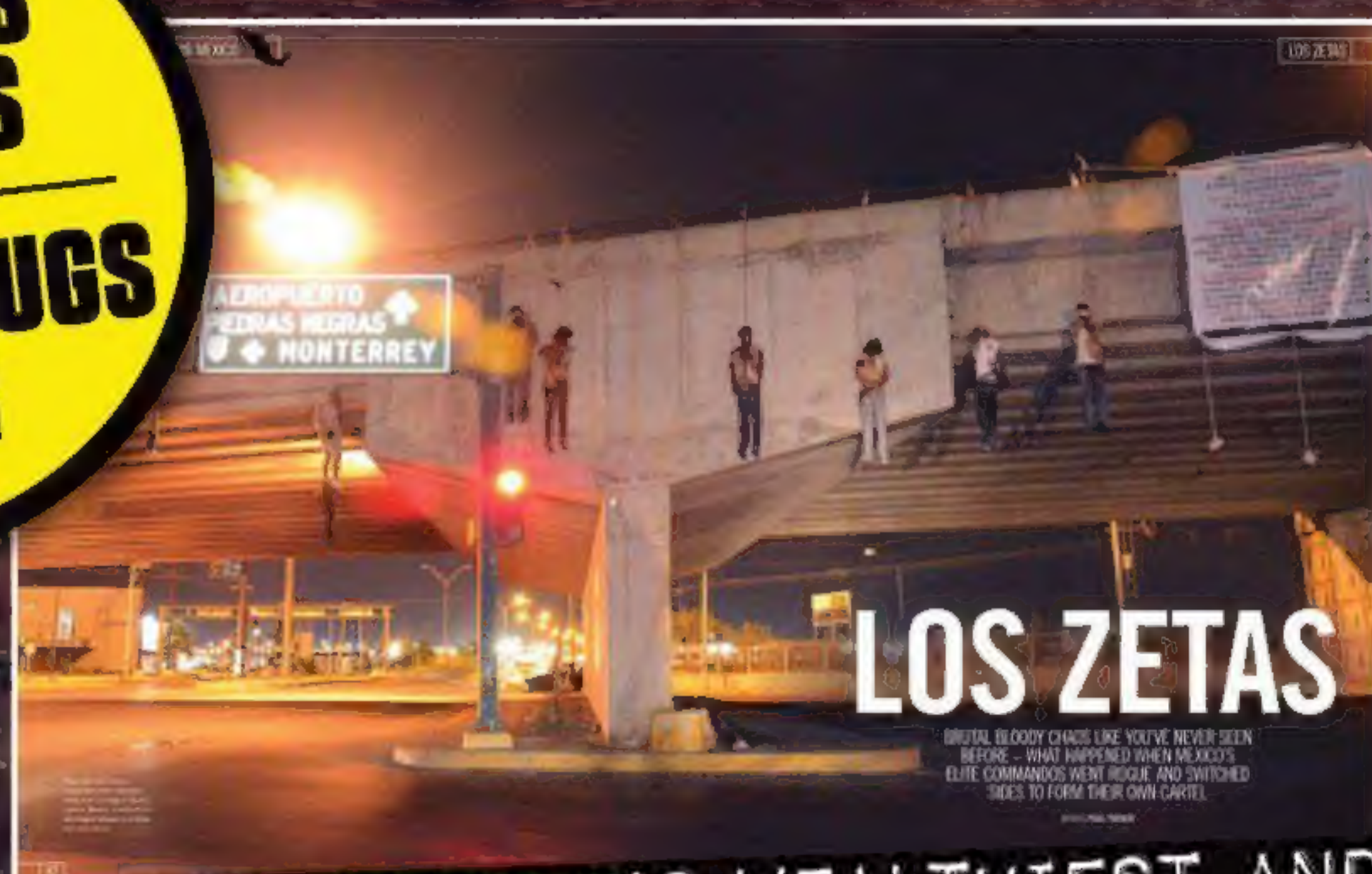


LEARN HOW THE ILLEGAL DRUG  
TRADE TOOK OVER THE WORLD



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HISTORY'S BIGGEST KINGPINS

MEXICO'S  
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OF  
BLOOD, DRUGS  
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DISCOVER THE BRUTAL TACTICS  
USED TO COMBAT THE NARCOS



At their peak, Pablo Escobar and the  
Medellín Cartel were responsible for  
80% of the world's cocaine production

